WORLD CUP PREVIEW

48 COUNTRIES
48 COVERS

UNITED STATES

ONE GLOBAL GAME

Sports Illustrated

JUNE 2026
VOLUME 137 | NO. 5
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Illustration by
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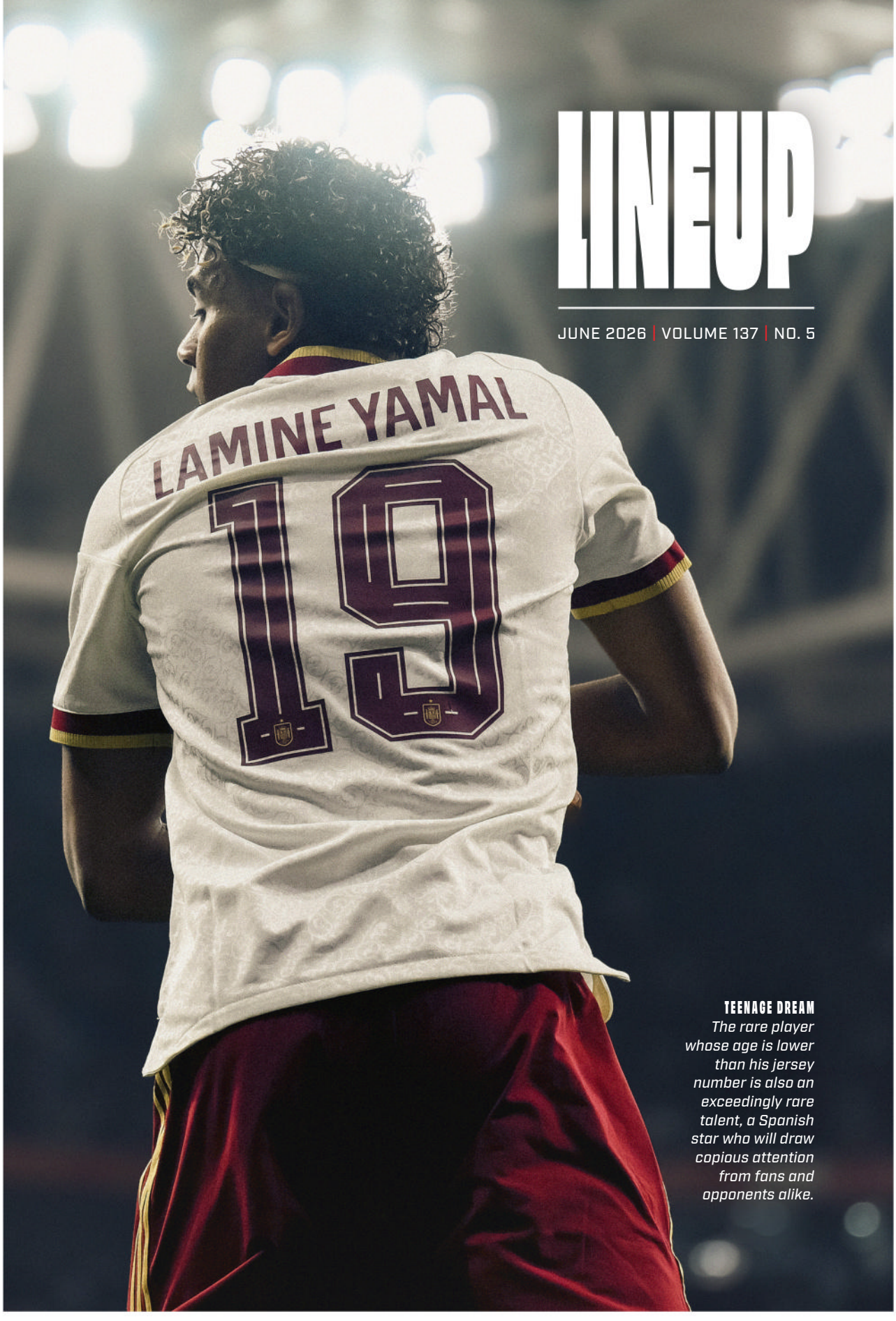

LINEUP

JUNE 2026 | VOLUME 137 | NO. 5

TEENAGE DREAM

The rare player whose age is lower than his jersey number is also an exceedingly rare talent, a Spanish star who will draw copious attention from fans and opponents alike.

DAVID RAMOS/GETTY IMAGES

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LINEUP

LEO THE LIONHEARTED
At age 38, Lionel Messi (below, right) is still going strong, two decades after his first World Cup start for Argentina, against the Netherlands.

BOB MARTIN

2026 WORLD CUP PREVIEW

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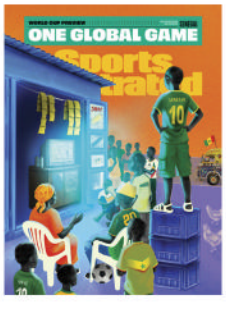
THE ART OF THE GAME

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED'S World Cup preview covers through the years have featured some of the biggest names in soccer: Messi, Ronaldo, Mbappé. But last fall, when we started making plans for the cover of this issue, creative director Stephen Skalocky had an idea: What if we tried something a little more ... democratic? Yes, the World Cup is all about superstars. But the true joy of the tournament stems from the ways it brings communities and cultures together every four years. Soccer (or football, or fútbol) is the global game. It also carries a localized resonance in nearly every country on the map. This World Cup, with its expanded 48-team field, would directly touch more communities than ever before. What if we celebrated that local spirit rather than a few transcendent personalities?

So as those 48 nations fell into place, Skalocky began reaching out to artists living in or strongly connected to each one with a simple ask: Create an illustration that captures the cultural heartbeat of soccer in your country. Along with art director Stephen Goggi, designer Lila Shokr and SI FC editors Brian Goldfarb, Dan Willis and Toby Cudworth, Skalocky spent months exploring ideas, refining sketches and locking down final color.

The results, which you can see beginning on page 51, add up to one of the most ambitious projects in SI's history. Forty-eight artists, 48 countries, 48 windows into the many ways sports and culture overlap. (Four—Argentina, France, Mexico and the United States—are featured as magazine covers. All 48 will live as digital covers at world-cup.si.com and on our social channels.) Some illustrations focus on the heroes those fan bases will cheer on (or suffer with) this summer: Argentina and Messi, the U.S. and Christian Pulisic, Spain and Lamine Yamal. Gonçalo Viana, representing Portugal, surrounded Ronaldo and Bruno Fernandes with cultural touchstones including a Portugese guitar. "Fado is Portugal's national music style," explains Viana. "It intertwines with the way we view football, as it is full of sad themes where one cannot escape fate and for most of our national squad's career we've always seemed to fail when reaching the big stage."



Football is life, indeed. Other artists focused on the togetherness the sport creates, regardless of match results. "In Senegal, football is a shared ritual that extends far beyond the stadium," says illustrator Audrey d'Erneville. "When an important match is on, neighbors gather outside corner shops to watch together on a small television, turning the street into a communal viewing space."

Some pieces are more conceptual—such as Uruguay, which references the poster made for the very first World Cup, hosted and won by that nation in 1930. Artist Gabriela Sánchez updated the image of a sprawling goalkeeper, with a color palette echoing the national flag and Uruguay's distinctive grassland landscape. It may be a cliché to call soccer the beautiful game, but the artistry of the sport extends far beyond those who play it. That's the spirit that we hope flourishes as the world comes to North America this summer. □

by **STEPHEN CANNELLA**

FROM TOP: FINE ART IMAGES/HERITAGE IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; GABRIELA SÁNCHEZ; GONÇALO VIANA; AUDREY D'ERNEVILLE

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2026

THE KICKOFF

It's back, baby! For the first time since 1994, the World Cup will be contested on North American soil. We've got the biggest field in history. We've got more star power than ever. We've got everyone's favorite North American band...[checks notes]: Coldplay. When it's all over, what team will be on top? A familiar European power

WORLD CUP PREVIEW

Bleu Wave

Kylian Mbappé leads a relentless attack that will propel France to its fifth final—and third title—in the last eight tournaments.

DANIELLE PARHIZKARAN/THE BOSTON GLOBE/GETTY IMAGES

GROUP		TEAM
A	1	MEXICO
	2	SOUTH KOREA
	3	CZECHIA
	4	SOUTH AFRICA
B	1	SWITZERLAND
	2	CANADA
	3	BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA
	4	QATAR
C	1	BRAZIL
	2	MOROCCO
	3	SCOTLAND
	4	HAITI
D	1	UNITED STATES
	2	TÜRKIYE
	3	AUSTRALIA
	4	PARAGUAY
E	1	GERMANY
	2	ECUADOR
	3	CÔTE D'IVOIRE
	4	CURAÇAO
F	1	NETHERLANDS
	2	JAPAN
	3	SWEDEN
	4	TUNISIA

GROUP		TEAM
G	1	BELGIUM
	2	IRAN
	3	EGYPT
	4	NEW ZEALAND
H	1	SPAIN
	2	URUGUAY
	3	SAUDI ARABIA
	4	CABO VERDE
I	1	FRANCE
	2	NORWAY
	3	SENEGAL
	4	IRAQ
J	1	ARGENTINA
	2	ALGERIA
	3	AUSTRIA
	4	JORDAN
K	1	PORTUGAL
	2	COLOMBIA
	3	DR CONGO
	4	UZBEKISTAN
L	1	ENGLAND
	2	CROATIA
	3	GHANA
	4	PANAMA

ROUND OF 32

- MATCH 1: 1E GERMANY vs 3D AUSTRALIA
- MATCH 2: 1I FRANCE vs 3F SWEDEN
- MATCH 3: 2A SOUTH KOREA vs 2B CANADA
- MATCH 4: 1F NETHERLANDS vs 2C MOROCCO
- MATCH 5: 2K COLOMBIA vs 2L CROATIA
- MATCH 6: 1H SPAIN vs 2J ALGERIA
- MATCH 7: 1D UNITED STATES vs 3B BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA
- MATCH 8: 1G BELGIUM vs 3A CZECHIA
- MATCH 9: 1C BRAZIL vs 2F JAPAN
- MATCH 10: 2E ECUADOR vs 2I NORWAY
- MATCH 11: 1A MEXICO vs 3E CÔTE D'IVOIRE
- MATCH 12: 1L ENGLAND vs 3J AUSTRIA
- MATCH 13: 1J ARGENTINA vs 2H URUGUAY
- MATCH 14: 2D TÜRKIYE vs 2G IRAN
- MATCH 15: 1B SWITZERLAND vs 3G EGYPT
- MATCH 16: 1K PORTUGAL vs 3I SENEGAL

ROUND OF 16

- MATCH 1: 1E GERMANY vs 1I FRANCE
- MATCH 2: 2A SOUTH KOREA vs 2C MOROCCO
- MATCH 3: 2L CROATIA vs 1H SPAIN
- MATCH 4: 1D UNITED STATES vs 1G BELGIUM
- MATCH 5: 1C BRAZIL vs 2I NORWAY
- MATCH 6: 1A MEXICO vs 1L ENGLAND
- MATCH 7: 1J ARGENTINA vs 2D TÜRKIYE
- MATCH 8: 1B SWITZERLAND vs 1K PORTUGAL

QUARTERFINALS

- MATCH 1: 1I FRANCE vs 2C MOROCCO
- MATCH 2: 1H SPAIN vs 1G BELGIUM
- MATCH 3: 1C BRAZIL vs 1L ENGLAND
- MATCH 4: 1J ARGENTINA vs 1K PORTUGAL

Pedri

Bruno Guimarães

FROM TOP: DAVID ALIAGA/NURPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES; MASASHI HARA/GETTY IMAGES

WORLD BEATERS

The biggest field ever will be topped by a familiar country

SEMIFINAL 1

SPAIN
VS
FRANCE

FINAL

FRANCE
VS
ARGENTINA

ARGENTINA
VS
BRAZIL

SEMIFINAL 2

THIRD-PLACE GAME

SPAIN
OVER
BRAZIL

2026 WORLD CUP

CHAMPION

FRANCE

SIMON BRUTY/ANYCHANCE/GETTY IMAGES

WORLD CUP PREVIEW

A TALE OF TWO COUNTRIES

A fan's attitude toward the World Cup—as well as their nation's hopes—depends on where they live

by **THORE HAUGSTAD**

by **PETE REID**

ON A freezing November evening last year, a gang of soccer players skipped into a bus heading to downtown Oslo.

They were going to the town hall to celebrate Norway's first World Cup ticket since 1998, a big deal on this five-and-a-half-million-strong strip of snowy mountains, oil rigs, salmon farms, high taxes and caramelized brown cheese.

But a Swede had tried to spoil the party.

Earlier that day, the columnist Olof Lundh had called the party "strange" and "borderline pathetic." Sweden is Norway's neighbor and brotherly rival, with a richer soccer history, and Lundh added, "Save the celebration for when you've eventually done something at the World Cup."

Confident soccer nations would have brushed off the jibe, but as the bus lurched toward the center of the capital, a sliver of doubt spread on social media about whether this was the right thing to do. It was early on a dark Monday evening, and a lot of people were still working. Live on TV, pundits were trying to explain the small turnout, masking fears that, having waited 28 years for this moment, Norway would not even know how to recognize it.

Yet by the time the bus arrived, the crowd had grown to 45,000.

One by one, the players skipped out onto the balcony wearing khaki puffer jackets. The town hall facade was lit up in red, white and blue. Forward Aron Dønnum did the most un-Norwegian thing possible by attracting extra attention, leading a rendition of "Pump It Up" while wearing sunglasses and a white fleece balaclava cap. In the sea of smiling faces, kids wore face paint. Adults grinned under plastic Viking helmets. At some point, assistant coach Brede Hangeland, the team's 6'5" former defender and captain, broke down in tears.

"I'm a man, so I'm not supposed to cry," he told reporters. "But that was too much."

Finally, the staff could see what this meant to the people in the streets.

After cutting a cake and greeting the prime minister, the players moved on to a bar, where fans drank long into the night. Even Swedes admitted that this time, Norway deserved a proper party.

For Norway, the celebration was a victory in its own right. On a normal day, the carousing would have been halted by the unwritten rule that pervades Scandinavian culture. In fact, it's a law. *Janteloven*. The Law of Jante.

It was written as satire by the Danish-Norwegian author Aksel Sandemose in 1933. There are 10 rules, but the first one sums it up: *Do not think you are anything special.*

"You can mark down 25 June 1978 as the day Scottish football conquers the world."
—Ally MacLeod

SCOTLAND'S COMPLICATED relationship with the World Cup didn't start in 1978, but for many it remains shaped by it. We think of the images of the players on an open-top bus parade in the national stadium, and along the streets to the airport. Manager Ally MacLeod filling a nation with confidence. Flags waving and tens of thousands of fans joyous. But this wasn't a celebration of Scotland winning the World Cup. This was the level of anticipation and expectation as the team was merely setting off for the tournament in Argentina.

Spoiler alert: Scotland did not conquer the world in 1978.

A loss to Peru and a draw with Iran left Scotland in a big tartan hole, having to beat the Netherlands, one of the tournament favorites, by three goals to advance. Scotland actually won the game, 3–2, and for a fleeting moment, after Archie Gemmill scored one of the greatest goals in the history of the World Cup, the fans had hope and expectation restored.

But Scotland exited at the group stage again, in a particularly Scottish manner, now recognized as a "glorious defeat." To many, it was a defining lesson in never allowing themselves to believe in the Scotland football team again. For the rest of us, it was even more personal.

It's difficult to understate the significance of football in daily life in Scotland. Legendary Liverpool coach Bill Shankly, a native of the small mining community of Glenbuck, once contended with the belief that football was a matter of life and death. "I can assure you it is much, much more important than that," he said. It's a sentiment that most Scots can still relate to.

The attendance of Scotland's top league per capita is more than 70% higher than any other league in Europe. If we are not playing football, we are watching it. The passion of the Scots for the game is undeniable. For whatever reason though, this has never translated into national team success. Maybe because we won't let ourselves believe again.

"Oh, no no. Eighteen minutes gone and Scotland stupidly take the lead against the greatest team in the world. Don't celebrate! You'll only make them angrier!"
—Allaster McKallaster

Four years after 1978, Scotland traveled to Spain for the 1982 World Cup and came up against a Brazilian team still regarded as one of the best ever. Watching that game with my dad and his friends is one of my first memories

FROM TOP: ADRIAN DENNIS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; ROSS PARKER/SNS GROUP/GETTY IMAGES

If you did well, don't say it. Got a fancy car? Hide it. With one of the strongest social security nets in the world, Norway tries to make sure nobody falls behind. The Law of Jante hauls back anyone who's getting too far ahead.

Which is a problem in soccer, where winners rarely follow the herd. Not even in the glorious '90s, when Norway made back-to-back World Cups, did they have a mercurial star who broke all the rules.

That guy turned up in Sweden.

Zlatan Ibrahimović elbowed his way to the top with flicks, tricks and a hard-nosed Balkan mentality. When asked about comparisons to the Norwegian striker John Carew, he said, "Whatever [he] can do with a soccer ball, I can do with an orange."

Watching him on TV was a young Erling Braut Haaland.

"I know he was a big inspiration for Erling," Leif Smerud, who coached Haaland at the youth national team level, told the British newspaper *The Times* last year. "Zlatan was a bit un-Scandinavian, being more confident, more outspoken, more eccentric, and that's anti-Jante. But Zlatan had an incredible work ethic and was a good teammate, which is very Jante."

Even before leaving Norway, Haaland teamed up with Mino Raiola, the late Italian-Dutch agent who was a walking protest against the Law of Jante. At Dortmund, Haaland appeared on Instagram wearing Dolce & Gabbana clothes decorated with flamingos, zebra stripes and leopard print. His watch collection seemed to expand by the week, and we all got to see it. If Haaland was to be abnormally good, it made no sense to act like everyone else.

Nobody in Norway minded too much until March 2022, when Haaland turned up at a national team camp in a private jet and asked not to face the media. A national debate questioned the "special treatment" of a star who appeared to think he was better than the rest. Which, of course, he was. But in a country where even the king was pictured taking the tram in the 1970s, Haaland was not supposed to show it.

The nadir came in October 2024, when Norway lost 5–1 away to Austria, and Haaland, as captain, refused to talk to the press. He apologized, but not before being slammed. Just over a year later, Norway delivered one of the best World Cup qualifying campaigns in European history.

When Norway beat Italy in its final game, commentators were tearing up live on air. The team had won all eight of its games. Haaland had played so well that one Norwegian columnist said he was "exempt from the Law of Jante." He was

of what it is like to be a Scotland fan. I was 6 years old at the time.

To the surprise of everyone, Scotland took the lead in Seville. An almost apologetic toe poke by defender Dave Narey flew into the top corner of the Brazilian net. This 6-year-old celebrated a little too hard singing, "We're going to win the World Cup," before I was sternly told to shut up by my dad's pals, to whom the shame of 1978 was still fresh. When Scotland eventually lost 4–1, I got the blame.

Scotland exited in 1982 at the group stage on goal difference, as we had done in 1974, and in 1978. And so began the bookmarks of my childhood, where Scotland would qualify for World Cups, but we were constantly reminded not to expect anything other than more pain and glorious failure.

And that is exactly what Scotland got at Mexico 1986 and Italy 1990. In 1994 we didn't qualify for the field in the United States. This was merely a glitch, we assumed, and in 1998 we returned to the world stage in the opening game against Brazil. But 13 days later we lost 3–0 to Morocco and, yet again, we exited at the group stage. *We'll be back soon for another glorious failure*, we assumed. We were wrong. Twenty-eight empty years passed.

"We'll deep-fry your paella. We'll deep-fry your tapas. We'll deep-fry your gazpacho soup. You come to Scotland, you're getting battered."

—Allaster McKallaster

I was a fanatical Scotland fan as a 22-year-old in 1998, but I didn't go to the World Cup. Now I'm 50 and I've never been to a World Cup. But

Braveheart Attack

While no Archie Gemmill, Scott McTominay (4) still has fans feeling anything is possible.

Law Breaker

Haaland averages more than a goal a game for Norway, inspiring fans to unprecedented levels of pride and joy.

right, and it gave a rough answer to what justifies a little brag in Norway: 16 goals in eight matches.

Later, it emerged that the idea for the town hall party was his.

Norwegians are still trying to process who they have become. For the group draw in December, they obsessed about avoiding the underdogs, forgetting that the greatest dark horse was them. They were shocked when Canada coach Jesse Marsch named Norway as the one team he wanted to avoid, and when bookmakers made Norway the ninth favorite to win the whole thing.

Norway is the butterfly that spent 26 years as a larva, transformed overnight and is now looking in the mirror asking, "Is that really me?"

Still, the World Cup craze is real. Norway is planning to ease its strict alcohol laws during the tournament, and a group of fans has seriously considered crossing the Atlantic in a Viking ship.

This summer, the Norwegians *are* special. For a few weeks, they might just allow themselves to believe it. □

Scotland is back and I'll be there with Allaster McKallaster, the country's most unbiased commentator who uttered those now famous words about Spanish cuisine as Scotland defeated Spain on their way to qualification for the 2024 Euros. It's a viral video that has been viewed by more than 35 million people. Or perhaps seven times by all five million Scots.

Of course, McKallaster is anything but unbiased. He is the most impartial, most Scottish, most over-the-top sports commentator you've ever heard. I should know. Because I am Allaster McKallaster.

I left Scotland and immigrated to the U.S. in 2002, but I've always tried to keep a connection with my homeland. The McKallaster videos started as a joke for my friends here in Austin. How biased could a commentator be yet still sound authentic? The answer is there is no limit, and people seem to get the joke. McKallaster now has more than 850,000 followers across social media (@McKallaster on Instagram, TikTok and YouTube), and more than 500 million views on hundreds of videos.

After the Spain victory, we—and by that I mean McKallaster and I—went to the 2024 Euros in Germany along with an estimated 200,000 Scots starved for major tournament action. Unbelievably, people recognized McKallaster, wanted selfies with him, and told me how watching my videos made them happy when they were depressed. It felt like my connection to home had been restored. I loved every second of my two weeks in Germany. Apart from the three times when Scotland was playing football. Once again, Scotland exited at the group stage. This time there was only failure, no glory.

So now, with a new generation of Scottish fans, untarnished with the disappointments of the past, and an older generation with fading memories, how does this proud nation feel about our chances in 2026?

I would say that everyone is happy to be there. I would say that virtually no one expects Scotland to win it. Getting out of the group stage for the first time ever would probably be deemed a success. Much will depend on our results against two familiar foes. After an opening game against Haiti, Scotland will again face Morocco and Brazil, and the demons of 1998.

Would we accept glorious failure again? Perhaps. Failure, no, but give us a sniff of glory, a glimmer of hope, a moment or two to remember what it feels like to believe, and I think we would take that.

As for Allaster McKallaster though, his expectations remain undiminished. His unbiased and factual opinion is clear:

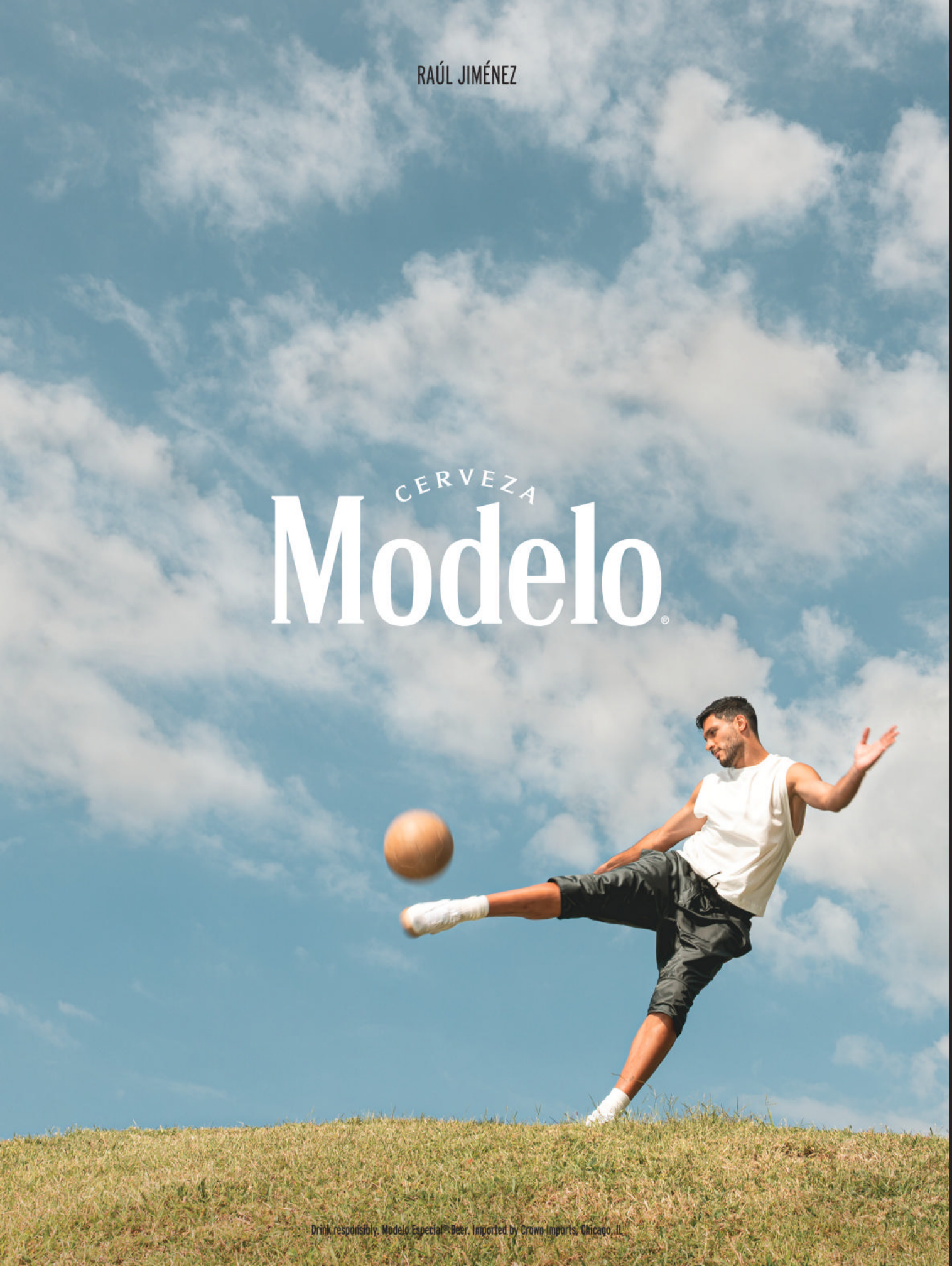
"You can mark down 19 July 2026 as the day Scottish football conquers the world." □

FROM LEFT: CRAIG WILLIAMSON/SNS GROUP/GETTY IMAGES; FABRIZIO CARABELLI/SOPA IMAGES/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY IMAGES

SO, HOW'S EVERYONE FEELING?

Who's got angst? Who's got ability? Here's how all 48 teams stack up in terms of the pressure they're under and their chance to win

RICARDO MAKYN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES


RAÚL JIMÉNEZ
CERVEZA
Modelo®
Drink responsibly. Modelo Especial® Beer. Imported by Crown Imports, Chicago, IL

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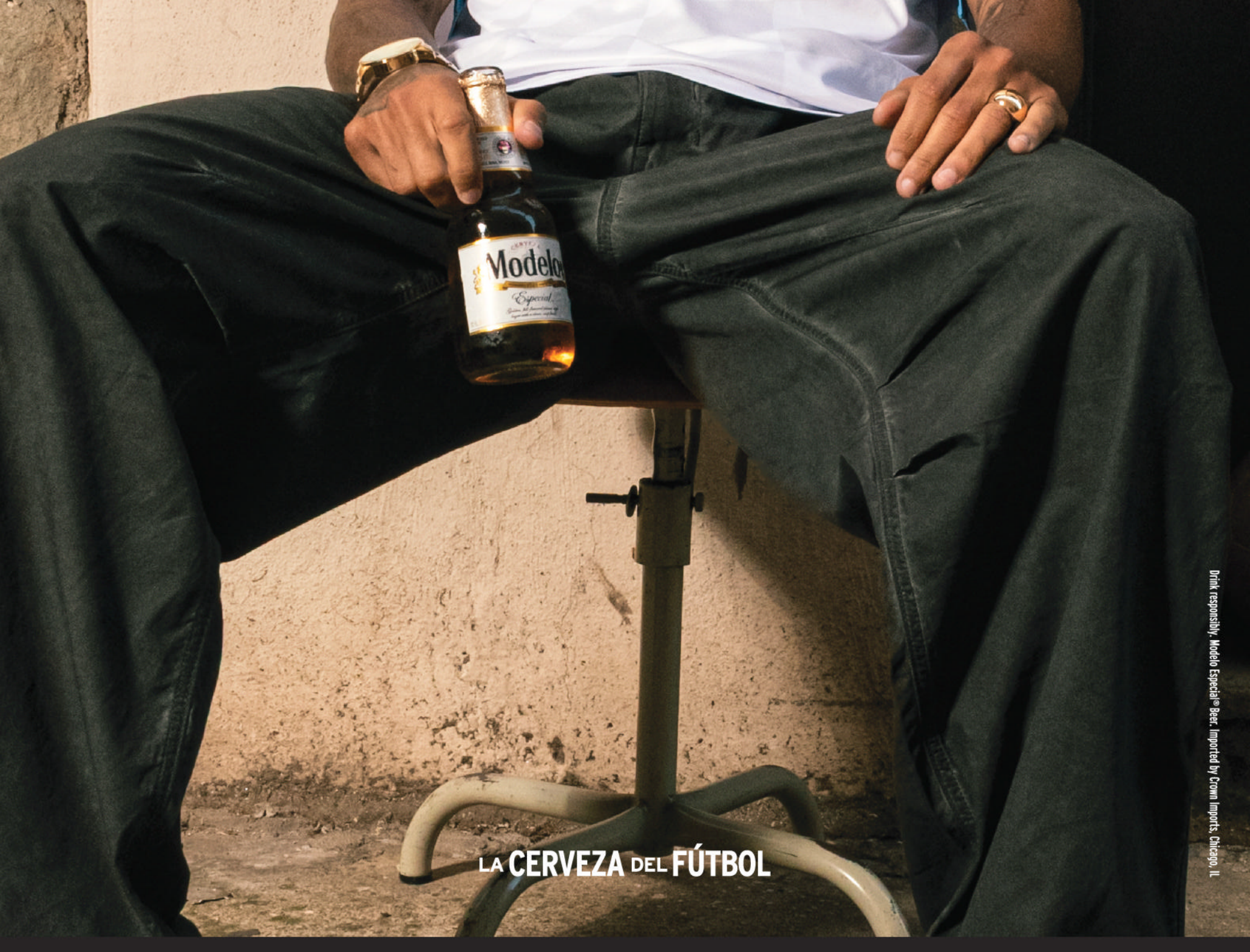
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LA CERVEZA DEL FÚTBOL
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RAÚL JIMÉNEZ & EDSON ÁLVAREZ
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SHIRT STORIES

Sure, a national team could throw a flag and some stripes on a jersey and call it a day. But a World Cup uniform is more than a way to distinguish one team from another on the pitch. It's a canvas for celebrating cultural heritage, boasting of native natural wonders—and for a lucky few, flexing over past success. Here are the details behind some of this year's most intriguing kits

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY BRYCE WOOD; ROY ROCHLIN/GETTY IMAGES (STATUE)

MOST PERFORMATIVE GENEROSITY

The oxidized-copper green of France's away jersey is a nod to the Statue of Liberty, which Les Bleus would like to remind you was a gift from their country to the United States in 1886.

MOST BRAGGADOCIOUS

Argentina's home jersey features the three different shades of light blue worn for its three World Cup titles. Germany's home kit combines chevrons, diamonds and other design elements pulled from its four championships.

MOST WEB FRIENDLY

The multicolored cobweb design on Ghana's home kit is inspired by Kwaku Ananse, a spidery trickster in Ghanaian folklore known for wisdom, cunning and mischievousness and for outsmarting more powerful foes.

MOST LITERARY

Colombia's bright yellow home jersey is inspired by *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the classic 1967 novel by Gabriel García Márquez. The iconic Colombian author made the butterfly a recurring symbol of love and the vicissitudes of life.

MOST SURREAL

Belgium's colorfully abstract away kit pays tribute to painter René Magritte, that nation's homegrown master of surrealism. The quote printed below the collar is a clever touch: *Ceci n'est pas un maillot*—"This is not a jersey."

MOST ANCIENT WORLD

The pyramid long ago fell out of favor as a tactical formation, but it lives on as kit inspiration. Egypt calls out its Before Common Era architectural roots with echoes of its most famous structures in the design of its home jersey.

MOST LEAP/FROG BRANDING

Brazil's away kit features Nike's Jumpman logo, a first for a World Cup jersey. Never mind that palming the ball like that is a foul in soccer. Also, try not to shudder at the inspiration for the blotchy blue-black print: the poison dart frog, a feared Amazonian predator.

GLOVE STORY

Penalty kicks—and the psychology and science behind them—will play an even bigger role at this World Cup

by **MARK BECHTEL**

5 MINUTE GUIDE

AFTER HIS spectacular showing in a shootout in the 2025 Gold Cup quarterfinals against Costa Rica, U.S. goalkeeper Matt Freese declared, "Penalties are my thing."

It wasn't idle talk. When he was a student a Harvard, Freese *(above)* undertook what he calls "a very long research project" on the subject. He's notoriously tight-lipped about what he learned, and for good reason. If you cracked the code on something this important, you probably wouldn't want to share it with the world either.

Like virtually everything else in sports, PKs have become influenced by analytics and tendencies. If a player likes to hit it to his left, the keeper knows that. But the shooter knows that the keeper knows that, so maybe he'll go right. But then the keeper knows that the shooter knows that the keeper knows that, too. It can be mentally exhausting. "It's a bit of reverse psychology," says former U.S. national team keeper Brad Guzan. "And then it's double-reverse and triple-reverse and quadruple ...."

Another former U.S. goalkeeper, Tim Howard, liked to do a little profiling—especially in the days before data was widely available. Howard assumed a big player would prefer a powerful shot (i.e., a right-footed player would hit the ball to his left). "If there was a player on the field who was sort of a fancy passing midfielder and was more classy and clinical," says Howard, "I think they would open up and side-foot it to their right."

Freese spent time on the plane traveling to the Gold Cup match studying tendencies, and it clearly paid off. He went in the correct direction on five of six penalties (including one on which he didn't move and collected a shot down the middle), saving three. It's the kind of performance that teams will long for in the World Cup. Penalty shootouts have never been more prevalent: In 2022 there were a record five, and in each of the two previous tournaments there were four. With 16 more knockout games thanks to the expanded field, that mark should be shattered this year.

Even with improved data and whatever psychological advantages they can muster, shooters still hold the upper hand. But interestingly, the numbers are different for in-game penalties (a 79.1% conversion rate) vs. shootout performances (just 69.4%). That suggests that penalty takers feel the pressure of a must-make situation more, and that if a keeper can make one save, it can get into subsequent shooters' heads.

"It's an interesting psychological battle," says Howard. "Way more than it is physical." □

JUSTIN JAMES MUIR

THE BEST SEATS ARE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

The restaurants. The bars. The pubs. The shops. And all the other places that make the neighborhood, the neighborhood. We support over 4.5 million of them—every day.

That's who we spend every day fanatically supporting. And just like sports fandom – this is for life.

Square

See you in the neighborhood

BRANDING EXERCISE

What's in a name? Not a sponsor, if you're a FIFA-approved host site

AH, THE 1990S, a more innocent time. The internet was just in its infancy, being a social star meant shaking lots of hands at parties, and stadium naming rights weren't a thing. So when the U.S. hosted the World Cup in 1994, venues operated under their usual identities: Rose Bowl, Giants Stadium, Soldier Field, etc.

Now, nearly every stadium in North America has a brand in its name. And since FIFA doesn't have deals with those sponsors, they can't be associated with the World Cup—which means venues must cover up their branding and assume generic profiles. The final on July 19 won't be played at "MetLife Stadium." Welcome to "New York New Jersey Stadium" in East Rutherford, N.J.

That presents a challenge for fans attending matches: To get to the right place, you'll still have to put the usual sponsor-friendly venue name into your map app of choice. How well do you know your stadium brands? We gave you MetLife, and Vancouver is a gimme. But see if you can match the other host locations to their corporate names.

FIFA NAME	ACTUAL NAME
1 Atlanta Stadium	a AT&T Stadium
2 Boston Stadium	b BC Place
3 Dallas Stadium	c BMO Field
4 Estadio Guadalajara	d Estadio Akron
5 Houston Stadium	e Estadio Banorte
6 Kansas City Stadium	f Estadio BBVA
7 Los Angeles Stadium	g GEHA Field at Arrowhead Stadium
8 Mexico City Stadium	h Gillette Stadium
9 Miami Stadium	i Hard Rock Stadium
10 Estadio Monterrey	j Levi's Stadium
11 Philadelphia Stadium	k Lincoln Financial Field
12 San Francisco Bay Area Stadium	l Lumen Field
13 Seattle Stadium	m Mercedes-Benz Stadium
14 Toronto Stadium	n NRG Stadium
15 BC Place Vancouver	o SoFi Stadium

Answers: 1.m 2.h 3.o 4.d 5.n 6.g 7.o 8.e 9.i 10.f 11.k 12.j 13.l 14.c 15.b

RIP, GROUP OF DEATH

In light of the new 48-team field, here's an elegy for actually good group games

"FOOTBALL IS life" is a charming sentiment from *Ted Lasso*. But in the World Cup, death is where it's at. As in the Group of Death, that collection of four teams offering the most grueling path to the knockout stage.

Consider: In 2022, Group B featured four teams ranked in FIFA's top 20: England (5), the U.S. (16), Wales (19) and Iran (20). In 2014, Group D had three top-10 sides: Uruguay (7), Italy (9) and England (10). (The group was won by 28th-ranked Costa Rica.)

This time around, with a diluted field? Different story. Group B is topped by Switzerland, which is ranked 19th. Of the 12 groups, only Group C has so much as two top-10 teams: Brazil (6) and Morocco (8). Of the 72 round-robin games, only four will feature two top-15 countries.

Oh, well. Maybe the round of 32 will be good. □

ROBBIE JAY BARRATT/AMA/GETTY IMAGES

JOEL
EMBIID

BROOKE
HENDERSON

JULIUS
RANDLE

SKECHERS
HANDS FREE
Slip-ins

WE ALL WENT HANDS FREE.

HARRY
KANE

JACKIE
YOUNG

MATT
FITZPATRICK

USMNT

WORLD CUP PREVIEW

by JON ARNOLD

RICH VON BIBERSTEIN/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

Dry Run

Pulisic is fifth on the U.S. all-time goalscoring list, but he hasn't found the net in a year and a half.

LOOKING FORWARD

The heat will be turned up to high on the United States as it hosts the World Cup for the first time in 32 years. With a trendy coach and a strong nucleus of players, the opportunity to make a deep run—and take soccer to the next level—is here

The 1994 World Cup opening ceremony did not get off to an auspicious start for soccer purists. Diana Ross, singing "I'm Coming Out" at what was meant to be the world game's coming-out party in the United States, stepped to the penalty spot to have a go at converting the first goal of the tournament.

ANDREW J. CLARK/ISI PHOTOS/USSF/GETTY IMAGES

Open Options

Pochettino (opposite) has not been shy about experimenting tactically, including using McKennie in a variety of positions.

The shot missed the mark by some distance, but the goal still theatrically split in half down the middle. The show went on, but it ended up being wildly upstaged by the tournament itself, with the spectacle of soccer hitting the target and helping to launch the game to greater renown.

When the World Cup begins on June 11, the United States has a chance to show the world how much it has learned since Ross's effort. The biggest showcase in the sport is finally back on U.S. soil in a totally different landscape than when Bill Clinton was in his first term. There is no coming-out party needed. The sport has arrived in the U.S. At least, that's the idea.

Like 1994, there will be cringey moments from entertainers; we're getting the first World Cup final halftime show, a 25-minute set featuring Coldplay. But the ball rolling in the U.S. men's national team's opener against Paraguay is a moment many have dreamed of for decades.

It also will be a moment charged with expectation. Club owners, stakeholders and fans have long hoped this summer's tournament would firmly move soccer out of the niche it has occupied for more than six decades in this country and take its place as a "major" sport. Or perhaps it could at least help convince the thousands of people who turn up for exhibition matches played by teams visiting from England or Mexico or who flock to bars in the early morning to watch teams from Germany or Spain that it's worth tuning in to the local league as well—or at least subscribing to the streaming service it's offered on.

"We have an opportunity to inspire generations of people," says USMNT defender Tim Ream. "From young to old, from diehards to casual fans to people who aren't even interested in the game until the World Cup rolls around."

The easiest path to that actually becoming a reality is a deep run for the U.S., one that sweeps up those periodic fans and turns them into the type of soccer supporters who will pay attention more than every four years.

JOHN DORTON/ISI PHOTOS/USSF/GETTY IMAGES

"You want to have success in front of your own fans because you know what it means," says Cobi Jones, a World Cup veteran who played at the 1994 tournament and appeared in more matches for the USMNT than any other player. "You know that if you do have a successful World Cup, it allows for exponential growth of the game within your country."

The U.S. heads into the tournament as the No. 16 team in the FIFA rankings, so seeing the team standing alone as the confetti falls July 19 at MetLife Stadium feels all but impossible. But a run to the knockout stage that truly captures the nation's attention is within reach—especially with games played at an hour when it's socially acceptable to grab a beer at a bar, as opposed to, say, the 10 a.m. kickoff for the Yanks' last knockout game, in 2022 against the Netherlands.

The goal is "to go as far as we can because obviously anybody and any team entering the World Cup is going there to win it and has plans to win it. That's why we're there," midfielder Weston McKennie said in March. "That's why we do what we do, because we compete. I think that's the best way to describe success: for us to be proud of our performance."

Will the team's pride match the public's expectations? Can the USMNT do enough in this tournament to give a whole sport a boost? It will need everything to break right. It will need a number of superb performances from individuals and as a team. And it will need a guiding hand that leads the team to the correct decisions.

★ ★ ★

FOLLOWING THE LEADER

Wooing Mauricio Pochettino to the U.S. national team program in September 2024 felt like a coup. Predecessor Gregg Berhalter had played and coached abroad but hardly has the international cachet of the Argentine manager, nor had he produced anything close to the same on-field achievements.

Pochettino, 54, has worked at some of the most important clubs in the world—including Tottenham Hotspur, which he took to the 2019 Champions League final, and Paris Saint-Germain, which won the Ligue 1 title in 2021–22.

On top of that, while Pochettino had no experience managing a national team, he had gone to the tournament as a player. The combination of a successful playing career, experience coaching prestigious clubs and actually being available to work through the summer of 2026 made him a

HOST BUSTERS

Five of the first 11 World Cup hosts won it all. But as FIFA has broadened its site reach beyond blueblooded soccer nations, the standard for a successful tournament on home soil has changed.

YEAR	TEAM	FINISH
1930	**URUGUAY**	**Champion**
1934	**ITALY**	**Champion**
1938	**FRANCE**	Quarterfinals
1950	**BRAZIL**	Final
1954	**SWITZERLAND**	Quarterfinals
1958	**SWEDEN**	Final
1962	**CHILE**	Semifinals
1966	**ENGLAND**	**Champion**
1970	**MEXICO**	Quarterfinals
1974	**WEST GERMANY**	**Champion**
1978	**ARGENTINA**	**Champion**
1982	**SPAIN**	2nd Group Stage
1986	**MEXICO**	Quarterfinals
1990	**ITALY**	Semifinals
1994	**UNITED STATES** **ROUND OF 16**	
1998	**FRANCE**	**Champion**
2002	**SOUTH KOREA**	Semifinals
	JAPAN	Round of 16
2006	**GERMANY**	Semifinals
2010	**SOUTH AFRICA**	Group Stage
2014	**BRAZIL**	Semifinals
2018	**RUSSIA**	Quarterfinals
2022	**QATAR**	Group Stage

Alexi Lalas (22) and the USMNT survived the group stage but then were eliminated by Brazil, 1-0.

CHRIS COLE/ALLSPORT/GETTY IMAGES

22
22
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FUJIF

home run hire—even if he wasn't at all familiar with the idea of a home run.

At least, that's how it seemed at the time.

It hasn't all been sunshine in the Pochettino era. The U.S. lost both regional trophies on offer in 2025, falling to Panama in the semifinals of the Concacaf Nations League and losing to Mexico in the Gold Cup final. The rest of the year saw positive performances in friendlies, with a switch to a formation anchored by Crystal Palace standout Chris Richards that allows the wide defenders to aggressively join the attack.

In March, however, Pochettino's side lost 5–2 to Belgium and 2–0 to Portugal, though the manager insisted the learning experiences against two top 10 teams will serve the Stars and Stripes at the tournament.

"Even if it's painful, it's the only way to improve, the only way to learn, the only way to see how these top players and teams compete," Pochettino said after the Portugal loss.

Widely expected to return to a job in the European elite after the World Cup, the 54-year-old has generally been able to stay free from the types of tiffs that can plague international teams. He and star Christian Pulisic had a difference of opinion about how much the attacker should play during the summer of 2025, with the coach snapping, "Players need to listen and to stick with our plan." That saga, though, is now well in the past.

Getting along off the field is one thing. Getting everyone pulling in the same direction on it is another.

Rather than continue to utilize the same formation in those March games that had worked in the fall, Pochettino experimented further. He played Pulisic as a center forward rather than his usual role as a playmaker. He went to a flat back four instead of a three-man back line and stuck Tim Weah, who typically plays in attack, at right back against one of the world's best wingers, Belgium's Jérémy Doku.

The moves didn't work out, but the competition also was much steeper. While plenty of fans perceived a regression, members of the team itself insist the enthusiasm remains high. "I feel like we are a lot closer than people think," Pulisic said. "We put a lot of pressure on them in the first half of both the games.

"We were able to create chances, which if I finish chances, which I know I'm going to, then things are going to be a bit different."

Putting the ball in the back of the net more often is the simplest fix in soccer, but the lessons learned from matches against the European squads may go deeper. The nature of the international game, Ream says, is that the friendlies are one thing, but the World Cup is another. "We understand where things went wrong, and we understand how and when and what we need to do to fix those things," Ream says. "At the end of the day, the World Cup is the World Cup. Everything is completely different, and games that you played previously aren't actually going to matter. You can't think of all the bad things or the negative things or the momentum-sapping things that have happened because they don't matter at that point."

Pochettino will have to work quickly, though, to make sure the team is in the right place mentally ahead of the tournament and to determine how to get the most out of his group. While the USMNT won't run into a squad as deep as its March opponents in the group stage, the knockout round will produce those types of matchups.

"I think now is the time to learn, to get better," the manager said after the Portugal defeat. "I think the preparation for a World Cup has to be at the highest level, understanding we can get better. We have quality players, but we've got to improve, above all when we're playing against top-level players."

Pochettino has been in big moments before, and probably received more scrutiny in London and Paris than he'll get this summer across the U.S., but this is by far the biggest moment he's been in on the international stage.

Continental Lift

U.S. hopes will be buoyed by European-based players such as (from left) Cardoso, Tillman and Robinson.

JOHNNIE IZQUIERDO/USSF/GETTY IMAGES

> Says Ream, "We have an opportunity to **inspire** generations, from diehards to casual fans to people who aren't even interested until the World Cup rolls around."

★ ★ ★

THE BEST CHANCE AT SUCCESS

Pochettino's arrival isn't the only reason for hope at this tournament. The USMNT should be hitting its stride. After the frustration at the failure to qualify for the 2018 World Cup in Russia, many young American players started to come through the ranks in MLS academies and make the jump to top clubs in Europe.

The U.S. has had players at important clubs before, but never in this quantity. Richards starts regularly in the Premier League, as does Fulham fullback Antonee Robinson. Pulisic and McKennie are regulars for historic AC Milan and Juventus, respectively. Forward Malik Tillman plays Champions League football for Bayer Leverkusen, and midfielder Johnny Cardoso does the same for Atlético Madrid. The list goes on. Gone are the days when simply having the quality to play in Europe is enough to clinch a place on the team.

The roster largely came together in 2022, and while it always looked too young to make a major statement, the U.S. advanced from its group with a win and two draws. That included a disciplined defensive showing against England and a victory over Iran thanks to a Pulisic goal. In the first round of the knockout stage, however, the USMNT couldn't cope with the speed of the Netherlands out wide and displayed a listless attack.

This year the field has expanded, meaning the groups are diluted to some extent. While the U.S. won't want to take anything for granted, its round-robin opponents Paraguay, Australia and Türkiye all have weaknesses it can exploit. Additionally, having topped Australia 2–1 in an October friendly

FROM LEFT: ANDREW J. CLARK/ISI PHOTOS/USSF/GETTY IMAGES; JOHN DORTON/ISI PHOTOS/USSF/GETTY IMAGES

Hold the Agita

Serie A stars McKennie (right) and Pulisic insist that the expectations they'll face at home won't impact their play.

and beaten Paraguay by the same score a month later only will help with confidence.

But simply getting out of the group isn't the standard for the U.S., especially with the big event taking place at home soil. "We want to show the world why we want to be one of the soccer powerhouses people talk about," Richards says. "It takes good performances. When it comes World Cup time, we'll be ready."

★ ★ ★

WITH THE PRESSURE ON Playing at home typically has helped teams at the World Cup. Pochettino cited South Korea's run to the 2002 semifinal as inspiration for his team.

But as 2026 World Cup cohost Mexico knows too well, sometimes that push from the crowd can become a burden. That relationship, long soured by high expectations and Mexico's frequent trips to the U.S. for friendlies, hit a low in November when El Tri fans in Torreon booed the team off the field after a scoreless draw. "Maybe that's why they always take us to the United States," forward Raúl Jiménez said afterward.

That's not the dynamic in the U.S., but the spotlight this summer will be brighter than it has been on any men's team in the nation's history. "It's a different kind of pressure when you're playing for your nation and playing for a World Cup and everything is riding on a few weeks," Jones says.

Social media increases that pressure, as does the fact that there never have been so many former players with microphones getting paid to opine on the current generation. Some of the best ever to wear the USMNT jersey—including Clint Dempsey, Landon Donovan, Tim Howard and Alexi Lalas—will work in analyst roles during the World Cup.

The players have shrugged off any criticism, noting the high expectations they have for themselves. "You guys want me to feel the pressure. That's for sure," Pulisic said in March, before the friendlies. "There's pressure. It's a World Cup. It's not because of my position in the team or anything. I'm used to this. I feel privileged to be in this position. There's pressure. I feel it. Yes. It's there, but it's nothing I can't handle. I'm going to attack it head-on, and we are as a team."

If the USMNT can shake off the pressure and advance through the field, it may succeed in its goal of further raising the profile of soccer in the country, especially ahead of the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics. But no matter how good or bad the performance, the World Cup—the sport's absolute pinnacle—will remain a singular event. Players can take the biggest stage only once every four years, with legacies cemented and moments magnified because of the significance of every kick, tackle or save. The tournament won't return to North America during their careers.

This is something so many have waited years and years to enjoy, and each of the 90-minute matches will be remembered forever.

The moment is here. It's up to the U.S. to meet it. □

CARRY THAT WEIGHT

by **ANDREW HEADSPEATH**

Hey Jude

Bellingham (10) is part of a core that has the potential to make England's sad saga better.

ASIDE FROM happy-to-be-here upstarts like Curaçao and Cabo Verde, every country in the 2026 World Cup brings its emotional baggage into the tournament. And no team carries a heavier load than England. The birthplace of the modern game has famously (or infamously) won soccer's greatest prize only once, and that was 60 years ago.

England's disappointments on the biggest international stage have run the gamut from embarrassing (failures to qualify in 1974, '78 and '94, a group stage exit in 2014) to heartbreaking (penalty kick defeats in the 1990 semifinals and 2006 quarterfinals, an extra-time loss in the 2018 semis).

Compounding the frustrations this century were the shortcomings of England's so-called Golden Generation:

FROM LEFT: OMAR VEGA/GETTY IMAGES; JACQUES FEENEY/OFFSIDE/GETTY IMAGES; EDDIE KEOGH/THE FA/GETTY IMAGES

the early 2000s talents—David Beckham, Steven Gerrard, Frank Lampard, Wayne Rooney and others—who comprised perhaps the finest collection of stars the country has ever produced at one time. Historically accomplished at the club level but chronic underachievers as a national team, the Golden Generation never went further in a major international tournament than that 2006 World Cup quarters loss. High-profile defeats are one thing. Consistent failure to live up to expectations leaves deeper scars.

Enter the 2026 team, another supremely talented group that some are calling the Golden Generation 2.0. Led by prolific goal scorer Harry Kane (age 32), midfield engine Declan Rice (27), sublime playmaker Jude Bellingham (22) and creative winger Bukayo Saka (24), this generation has fans again dreaming of a trophy. They've gone further than their golden predecessors ever did, with the 2018 World Cup semifinal followed by back-to-back Euro finals.

Hyperaware of repeating the missed opportunities of the past, England has bet on Champions League-winning manager Thomas Tuchel *(below, left)* to lead the way at this World Cup. Tuchel, 52, is a laser-focused German who prioritizes system over stars; the hope is that his tactical acumen is the missing ingredient for England, once again among the tournament favorites.

Winning this summer is the goal, but 2026 is unlikely to be the last roll of the dice. While the original Golden Generation was special for its concentration of superstars, England produces elite players with more regularity now.

"On paper, England has got one of the best teams in the world," says Phil Jones, a former Manchester United defender who made 27 appearances for the national team between 2011 and '18. "There is absolutely no getting away from that. Whether they go all the way is down to those fine details in the big moments."

This generation differs from the previous one in a key aspect: Kane and the other current stars have actually looked like they enjoy playing for England. The Golden Generation often seemed to suffocate under the weight of expectation and the country's vicious tabloid press. But the mood began to shift under Sir Gareth Southgate, who got this generation off the ground as national team manager from 2016 to '24. Says Jones, "The unity in the squad, the togetherness, was completely different to before."

The pressure is on again. But if they can finally harness those expectations, this generation may yet prove golden. □

by **L. JON WERTHEIM**

EVRIM AYDIN/ANADOLU/GETTY IMAGES

A STEP

Accomplished beyond his years, Barça's 18-year-old sensation has helped lift Spain into a favorite's role as he continues his march toward a seemingly limitless future

LAMINE YAMAL

WORLD CUP
PREVIEW

Vast as the palette might be, for all the emotions that athletes experience in the course of competition, pity isn't one that tends to stand out. But there was Lamine Yamal in Brussels last November, feeling genuinely sorry for the opponents he had just cooked.

DAVID RAMOS/GETTY IMAGES

In the 61st minute of a Champions League match, Yamal, the 18-year-old Barcelona winger, took a pass 20 or so yards in front of the goal. In a jag resembling a bit of slapstick comedy, he dribbled around, past and through a half dozen defenders, leaving them flat-footed in the grass, like garden gnomes. When only the goalkeeper remained as the final line of defense, Yamal garnished this run with a final dash of sorcery, using the outside of his left foot to guide the ball with power and precision into the back of the net.

It was a mismatch of skill, Yamal's sumptuous talent pitted against athletes who were merely world class, not generationally elite. It was also a mismatch of age. Yamal celebrated by flashing his signature hand gesture (more on that later) and an incandescent smile, revealing his signature braces, a reminder that Yamal is often closer in age to his opponents' kids than to the opponents themselves.

For Yamal, it recalled the goal he'd scored earlier in his career in a preseason game against FC Seoul. That one, too, triggered in Yamal pride for his feat, but also genuine compassion for the other guys. "In the end, they also have friends, just like I do," he said. "If I were a fullback, I wouldn't like it if a player who's much better than me were to keep getting away from me all the time. I would ask them to please slow down a little, otherwise my friends would make memes about it."

Yamal rehashed this all inside a television studio in Barcelona's warehouse district. He was there to appear on *60 Minutes*, and we spoke for nearly an hour. He was also there to shoot a commercial-slash-music video for Coca-Cola, based on "Jump," Coke's anthem for the 2026 World Cup.

Just a few years ago, Yamal's post-practice afternoons entailed playing FIFA with friends. Now he *is* FIFA. His Barça jerseys sell more briskly worldwide (reportedly 1.32 million in 2025) than those of any other player in the sport. The equivalent of a VPN, Yamal will be available and easily accessible in the U.S. this summer.

Youth Movement

His age has yet to match his number, but already Yamal has demonstrated a flair for playmaking that has left far more seasoned opponents flailing.

Spain ranks among the World Cup favorites and will kick off its campaign in Atlanta on June 15. And its swollen hopes rest largely on a star more than two years short of the cohost nation's legal drinking age.

THE STORY of Spain's best young soccer player begins not in Iberia but in Africa. In 1990, Fatima Nasraoui snuck onto a bus in Morocco and crossed into Spain in the hope of building a better life. When she had put enough money together, she sent for her boys, and soon Mounir and Abdul Nasraoui emigrated from Morocco to Spain, as well. Mounir was still a teenager when he met Sheila Ebana, a recent arrival from Equatorial Guinea, who was working at a local McDonald's. Bonded by their immigrant experience, they married, and in July 2007 had a son, whom they named Lamine Yamal, in honor of two friends who helped the couple financially.

A fine player in his day, Mounir had early designs of rearing his son as a soccer star. The young couple raised their boy in the town of Mataró (pop. 130,000) in the neighborhood of Rocafonda, a North African enclave a few blocks from the Mediterranean, a 45-minute drive north of Barcelona. Soon the sight of Mounir putting Lamine through dribbling and passing drills became a fixture on the asphalt pitch of the local park. Sometimes they recruited bigger kids, sometimes they used neighborhood dogs as stand-in defenders. "It was dribbling," says Yamal. "Since I was afraid the dog could catch me, I'd run away with the ball."

Mounir and Sheila divorced when their son was 3. ("Lamine Yamal Nasraoui Ebana" became just "Lamine Yamal.") Both parents were active in his upbringing. Sheila remarried another soccer enthusiast, moved to the town of La Torreta, and played the role of nurturer. Mounir was the soccer equivalent of a Little League dad.

Yamal was also raised by Rocafonda. The neighborhood was once described by the Spanish daily newspaper *El País* as "forgotten, isolated and stigmatized," but Yamal remembers it warmly. "I spent more time at the park than I spent at my home." It was there that he learned to use his gifts—his instincts, his anticipation and an almost subliminally fast first step.

On the other side of town, Lionel Messi was beginning his path to the GOAT pasture. And Yamal was getting noticed as well. First, he played for a team in his mother's neighborhood, C.F. La Torreta. At age 6, he was spotted by Barça scouts who recruited him for a junior team that played and trained on the pitches of La Masia, "The Farm," Barcelona's famed youth academy.

For Yamal, the manicured fields and wide-open spaces made it "soccer heaven." Albeit with a hellish commute. He and his father would often take two trains from Rocafonda, passing a ball in the aisle if the cars were empty; otherwise, they slept. Eventually, the club arranged for Lamine and Mounir to bunk at the academy. The reduced commute boosted Yamal's performance. Even playing up in age groups—he played in some U-16 games when he was 11—he scored early and often. More important, he showed a sixth sense for tactics and spacing and anticipation and creativity, the intangibles that augur greatness. Barça's manager at the time, Xavi, enlisted Yamal, then 15, to train with the first team.

Yamal made his La Liga debut on April 29, 2023. At just 15 years, 291 days old, he was the youngest player ever to represent Barcelona's first team. It was no novelty act. A boy against men, he more than held his own.

Soccer commentator Ray Hudson—himself a teenage phenom for Newcastle in the '70s—recalls watching Yamal play an early Champions League game against Inter Milan. "This was against the hairy-chested Italian defenders, who come in with tackles, with a machete down their jockstraps," he says. "And they couldn't contain him."

Barça had the foresight to lock up Yamal after turning down various offers—most notably a €250 million bid from Paris Saint-Germain. But Yamal also drew interest from the Moroccan federation, which recruited him for its national team. Yamal concedes that when Morocco beat Spain in the 2022 World Cup, his loyalties were tugged in both directions.

JEAN CATUFFE/GETTY IMAGES

Pretty as a Picture

Mounir (in blue, with his colorfully capped son) helped Yamal develop the dazzling skills that took him to stardom and a spot on Spain's national team (above).

CLIVE MASON/GETTY IMAGES

the biggest game of his young life. Not that he gave any indication: Yamal napped on the bus on the way to the Olympiastadion in Berlin. Against England, he assisted on the first goal of the final, tying the record for most assists (four) in a Euro tournament; changed the defense's spacing with his playmaking threat; and celebrated mightily when Spain won.

As if eager to show that this was no fluke, back in La Liga Yamal resumed his precocious, ferocious play. Goals came fast and furious, Yamal marking them with a signature hand gesture that creates a 3-0-4, a tribute to the Rocafonda postal code. The month he turned 18, Barça rewarded him with a contract reported to pay him around $30 million a season. (An assortment of brands confer roughly the same amount in endorsements.)

Last fall, he narrowly lost out to PSG's Ousmane Dembélé for the Ballon d'Or. Yamal took it in stride. "I don't dream of one Ballon d'Or, I dream of many," he said. "If I don't get them, it will be my fault."

His father, less so. "I think this is the biggest, I won't say theft, but moral damage done to a human being," Mounir memorably said. "Because I believe Lamine Yamal is the best player in the world by far, by a huge margin."

BY OFFICIAL soccer rules these days, there comes a time in any discussion of Yamal that there must be a comparison to Messi, who also happens to be the hero of the previous World Cup. We've reached that point. Two different players, two different eras, two wildly different personas, Messi's studied blandness versus Yamal's irrepressible color. Still, the overlap is both unmistakable and unshakable: two soccer Mozarts, both left-footed wingers, who came of age playing for the same club. Barça hasn't helped

> "I don't dream of one Ballon d'Or," says Yamal. "I dream of many. If I don't get them, it will be my fault."

Aware poachers were circling, the Spanish national team plugged a 16-year-old Yamal into a game against Georgia. Ultimately, he decided to represent Spain, the country of his birth, but his custom boots come adorned with the flags of both Morocco and Equatorial Guinea, a reminder that, as he puts it, "I represent a lot."

Yamal's star turn came in the 2024 Euros. In short order, he became the youngest player ever to play in the tournament; to score a goal; to help his country win the event. But the age records shortchange his impact. His side-winding goal against France in the semifinals, a curling, guided missile launched from outside the penalty area, stood as the Goal of the Tournament.

The day after his 17th birthday, he played in matters either. They may have plied Yamal with hype-defusing talking points—*I'm honored to be mentioned in the same breath, but I want to be the first Yamal, not the second Messi*—but they have also plied him with jersey No. 10, same as Messi and Diego Maradona before that.

But even before this came an unmatched moment of sports-greatness foreshadowing. When Lamine was barely 3 months old, the family entered a raffle through Barça. A dozen winning entrants would be treated to a family photo session alongside a Barcelona player, with the images compiled for a calendar to benefit UNICEF. Not only was Sheila's entry chosen—once summoned to Camp Nou for the shoot, she and her infant son were picked to pose alongside the club's ascending star … Lionel Messi.

Almost two decades later, the photographer that day, Joan Montfort, shows off the fruits of the serendipitous session. In one image, Sheila hands her son over to Messi, himself only 20 and beginning his assault on global soccer. Messi appears game but grips the baby gingerly. "Imagine," Montfort says, "Michael Jordan holding baby LeBron."

With the caveat that trajectories change and sports careers are sinuous, let the record reflect: At 17, Messi had played in eight matches, scored a single goal and tallied zero assists. Yamal had played 106 matches, scored 25 goals and amassed 28 assists. You could also make the counterpoint that Messi has won the Ballon d'Or a record *eight* times. Let Yamal win his first before we start comparing and contrasting.

The starkest differences between the two reside not in their play but in their modes of being. Intensely shy, Messi has been strenuously unknowable off the pitch. Yamal? In the words of Guillem Balagué, a dean of Spanish soccer coverage, "He is closer to a pop star than a traditional footballer." If Yamal's play screams look-at-me, so does everything else about him, from his platinum-dyed hair to his social media profile. Asked if he minds being a star, Yamal smiles, nods and laughs before the end of the question. "I don't. In fact, I like it!"

Yamal admits it can get to be a bit much. "A [conventional] 18-year-old kid gets out of school and goes home. I go out to practice while four paparazzi are at my house asking questions about my life. I turn on the TV, and I'm on TV. I walk down the street, and I see a kid wearing my jersey. Honestly, I believe I'll never be a normal 18-year-old, because people don't see me as normal."

Then again, he's not normal. FIFA has recognized Yamal as a generational talent—you'll be seeing a lot more of his braces and platinum locks at the World Cup. Yamal's image is unavoidable in Rocafonda, where his face has been rendered in graffiti on the asphalt soccer pitch. Even Uncle Abdul has renamed his local restaurant in his nephew's honor. It's now Bar Cafeteria LY 304, and a tinfoil replica of the World Cup trophy sits behind the bar.

The World Cup final will be held July 19, six days after Yamal turns 19. He hopes that evening that Spain will hoist the real trophy. But he vows that for all the expectation and change his transcendent skills have already wrought on his life, his relationship to the sport is unalterable. He'll continue playing soccer for—and from—the soul.

"I've never been the type of person who comes to the field thinking, *Oh, man, today I want to score four goals and three assists*. However, I do think, *I want to do what I used to do at the park*. I want people to have fun. I want to have fun with my teammates. And if I score lots of goals, that would be even better, but I believe soccer goes beyond that." □

WORLD CUP PREVIEW

Better nutrition. Improved training methods. Fewer cigarettes. Put it all together and soccer's elder statesmen aren't just prolonging their careers—they're continuing to dominate

KICKIN' IT

by **THORE HAUGSTAD**

FABRICE COFFRINI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Veterans' Day
Ronaldo (left) and Modrić—both of whom will be playing in this World Cup—tussled in their 20s way back in 2013.

SCHOOL

In 2016, Cristiano Ronaldo set a goal that felt mad even for him.

"I'm at the best club in the world and I want to retire here..." he said, referring to Real Madrid.

DARREN STAPLES/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

So far so good.

"...at 41."

You what?

Almost no soccer players stay at the top past 40, unless you're a goalkeeper, or Paolo Maldini, or your water bottle has been sourced from the actual Fountain of Youth. Strikers like Ronaldo tend to hit the wall by 35. Their legs sour. Their hearts beat slower. Each training session feels a little more painful than the last.

Yet at this World Cup, Ronaldo will be there. Portugal captain and lead striker...at 41. Last year Ronaldo did a test claiming his biological age was just below 29. You'd laugh, had you not suspected it was true.

While Ronaldo is an ascetic freak locked into a Rocky Balboa montage on repeat, he's not entirely alone. Since the first edition in 1930, only one male outfield player over 40 has appeared in a World Cup game: Roger Milla in 1994. Now, the Cameroon striker might be followed not just by Ronaldo, but also Croatia playmaker Luka Modrić (40) and Bosnia forward Edin Džeko (40).

We're not talking about the reserve left back for Curaçao here, all due respect. The oldest names at this World Cup are also some of the biggest.

Two decades ago these guys might have been sipping Negronis on a beach in the Caribbean right now, 20 pounds heavier, grappling with the post-career existential crisis. But many soccer stars are playing for longer. Two years ago, the

Rising Up

Džeko (11)—who's the target man in our starting lineup of the World Cup's best players of a certain age—headed home to equalize for Bosnia and Herzegovina in its playoff against Wales, which his side won on penalties.

OLD MAN'S ELEVEN

Portuguese defender Pepe became the oldest player at the Euros, at 41. In the qualifiers for that tournament, the record for oldest player was broken three times. A University of Vigo study found that, from 1992 to 2018, the average player age in the Champions League rose by 1.6 years.

Lionel Messi turns 39 in June. Over in Spain, Robert Lewandowski, who missed out on his third World Cup when Poland lost in a playoff to Sweden, has been scoring for Barcelona at 37.

There is a saying that soccer players die twice, the first time when they stop playing. At a time when tech CEO turned longevity lab rat Bryan Johnson spends millions a year on supplements and blood transfusions in a bid to live longer, these veterans are trying to stave off their own mortality. "Don't die," Johnson likes to say. You can imagine players writing something similar on their bathroom mirrors, staring at it every morning, saying it out loud: "Don't retire."

The question is: *How ... and why?*

(DISCLAIMER: THE methods you will read about here are carried out by professionals and might not all work for you. In fact, some of them might not even work for the professionals.)

"The Cigarette for me," says football genius Stanley Matthews.

The year is 1952. The headline is from a magazine ad. And Matthews is one of the biggest stars in England.

"Stan takes his training very seriously and soon discovered the cigarette which suited him best," says the copy. Next to the text, a smiling Matthews is holding a cigarette in his right hand, like Popeye raising a can of spinach.

Matthews never actually smoked, and he preferred carrot juice to alcohol. But in the 1970s and '80s Johan Cruyff and Michel Platini lit up in the locker room. Some British players geared up for games with steak or a slurp of whisky. At the 2006 World Cup, Zinedine Zidane was seen with a cigarette days before the semifinal against Portugal, in which he scored the winner (of course he did), even though he had fronted an EU campaign against smoking.

In 2000, Leicester City prepared for the League Cup final with a drunken training camp in La Manga, Spain, where the players were kicked out of their hotel after setting off a fire extinguisher in a piano bar. They won the game. Two years later, hard-running midfielder Ray Parlour scored for Arsenal in the FA Cup final, and on the plane home he was about to swill down a beer, only to hear a voice say, "No drinking." It was the coach, Arsène Wenger, who reminded him that they had a league title to clinch in five days. This was Saturday.

Saturday night: On a date, Parlour gets so drunk on champagne and tequila slammers that he stumbles across three tables.

Sunday: Parlour stops by a social club to greet his brothers and ends up downing 10 pints of Guinness.

Wednesday: Arsenal wins the league and Parlour is named Man of the Match. As he walks into the locker room, Wenger taps him on the shoulder.

"You were superb, Ray. Do you know what it was that made the difference?"

Parlour says, "No boss, what was it?"

"I stopped you drinking that beer on the plane."

BUT IN the last decade, the game has changed.

"The game is almost unrecognizable in terms of speed and pace and power," says Danny Donachie, who has worked as head of medicine at Everton and Aston Villa. The players are sprinting more. They're also playing more games, as the global calendar is packed with new tournaments and expanding old ones, such as this very World Cup.

"There's no hiding place," says Paul Balsom, head of UEFA's Fitness Advisory Group, who has worked as a performance manager for Sweden at three World Cups and seven Euros, and at Leicester when the club won the Premier League 10 years ago. "It's 24/7 for these top players. They have to take care of themselves both on and off the field. Most players are fitter and healthier than they've ever been."

What's the secret of those who hit 40?

"I don't think there's a magic potion that's going to add 10 years to a career," says Balsom, who stresses that players such as Ronaldo and Modrić are outliers. "But it's probably that they're genetically blessed, highly motivated and a little bit better at everything. And more focused when it comes to taking care of their bodies."

In the last decade, the soccer diet has transformed. Not long ago top teams in England would eat eggs, bacon and sausages, says nutritionist Laurent Bannock, who advises a series of elite soccer players and has worked with the national teams of Egypt and Belgium. "To a certain extent it would be about giving the players food they fancied."

Then clubs hired Michelin-star chefs, but even that is over. "We've got a new era of performance chefs," says Bannock. "They're more focused on actual sports nutrition requirements, things like fuel timing and protein needs as opposed to, 'Let's just throw some more cream in there and make it look amazing.' "

Yet even the clubs can't control what the players do at home. And the veterans count every calorie. Messi has long since cut down on soda and *milanesas*, thin breaded veal filets popular in Argentina. Ronaldo is said to eat six small meals

Balsom says there's no magic potion for longevity. "They're **genetically blessed...** and more focused when it comes to taking care of their bodies."

MARVIN IBO GUENGOER/GES SPORTFOTO/GETTY IMAGES

a day. At Man United, his teammate Patrice Evra once came over for lunch, hoping for red meat and bubbles, only to be served salad, chicken and mineral water. "When Cristiano invites you for lunch at his house, just say no," said Evra.

Lewandowski starts with dessert.

Then he eats carbs, then fish or meat. He ends the meal with a starter, like salad or soup. The idea came from his wife Anna, a nutritionist and three-time medalist at the Karate World Championships, based on the theory that sweet foods digest faster. Lewa avoids decadent indulgences such as lactose, wheat flour and whole milk. *Obviously.* A sleep coach has told him to rest on his left side to protect his stronger right leg.

"I don't know what's in his DNA," Barcelona coach Hansi Flick said recently. "But he recovers in three weeks from injuries that should last five."

For team staff, these habits can create trouble.

"The older player has a lot of power in a team," says Bannock. "I remember an awful lot of these big players would be having tantrums because certain foods weren't being made available. There are many players who grew up watching these guys on TV and now all of a sudden they're on the same team. They have far more influence than even the coach can have."

And if the coach kicks them out? Good luck.

"They're amazingly experienced," says Bannock. "And particularly in tournaments like the World Cup, experience is a *huge* factor."

ERLING HAALAND takes off his shirt and walks into the hypoxic chamber.

He could have had time off at home, eating snacks and watching Netflix, but Haaland is at the Manchester City training ground filming for his YouTube channel. The topic is how he prepares his body

Long Wait

After finding the net against France in the final, Messi got to hoist the World Cup trophy at age 35 in 2022, a tournament in which he was only the fourth-oldest player to score a goal.

for the next game. The answer is a series of mind-numbingly boring stretches and then a high-altitude chamber dialed up to 104°. Haaland climbs onto an elliptical bike.

"I struggle more in here," he says. "Go out on the pitch, I can run even more."

He'll do several short sessions. His heart rate should hit 150.

"This helps me recover faster between sprints. And that's a good thing, because I sprint a lot," he gasps. "Now I can't speak anymore."

He's working hard now. His heart rate is 141.

"Do I want to do this? No, I don't. Will I do it? Yeah."

He hits 150. Job done. Let's go home, Erling.

"Let's get 160," he says. "Because why not?!"

He hits 160. "Now I'm happy," he says. "Everything now is a bonus."

After another bucket of sweat, Haaland finally picks up the phone and shows it to the camera.

170.

"It's insane what he does," says Donachie.

"Working with personal trainers and recovery between games are probably the biggest differences," says Balsom. He used to work with the eternal Zlatan Ibrahimović and has since been advising French striker André-Pierre Gignac, who played for Tigres in Liga MX this season at 40.

"All of these players, they have their own specialists, and it's becoming more common," says Balsom. "And it may not be just one person, it might be a team of practitioners, a nutritionist, a chef, a fitness coach, a physiotherapist and maybe also a psychologist. You can't really compare it to what it was like 10 years ago, maybe not even five years ago."

The players do it not just to play more, but to avoid what experts agree is the No. 1 killer for longevity: bad injuries.

"One hundred percent," says Balsom. "Zlatan was never really the same after his serious knee injury at Manchester United."

The website Transfermarkt keeps a record of injuries. Looking at the careers of Ronaldo, Modrić, Džeko, Messi and Lewandowski, spanning 20 years, thousands of top-level games and tens of thousands of training sessions, there are no serious setbacks. No ACL ruptures. No leg breaks. The worst case occurred in 2014, when Modrić was out for four months with a muscle tear in his left thigh.

The clubs have upped their recovery game, aware that if you pay your stars half a million dollars a week, you may as well spend a few more cents to make sure they can actually play. They have long used GPS to track workload. If the coach of your favorite team took off the best player for no apparent reason, perhaps the analysts felt that, with 10 minutes more on the field, his right hamstring might snap.

Players are also using compression pants, high-pressure hyperbaric chambers, and cryo chambers that go down to −240°.

"You've got terms that you'll be familiar with," says Bannock, "like *prehab* ..."

Prehab?

"Instead of rehab work, you're doing work in advance to prehabilitate, to prevent. If we mix that with recovery, pre- and post-exercise training and tournament match recovery, from ice baths, cold tubs to gadgets that you strap on, blood restriction devices ... I mean, there's no end of issues."

It's hard to know what actually works. Bannock feels people exploit the players' desperation to play longer. "There's a lot of pseudo-science rubbish out there," he says. "And there's lots of influencers and lots of experts, but they don't really know."

Some private fitness coaches don't even have any qualifications, according to Balsom, who adds that some are merely keeping the players company. "It's a bit of a jungle out there," he says.

The culinary world is no exception.

"There's too many approaches to food, there's too many supplements out there," says Bannock. "The evidence is maybe down here." He lowers his hand. "The hype is up here." He raises it. "The marketing, the influences on the players, on the staff, on the nutritionist, it's just a minefield."

Is it better to start dinner with dessert?

"No, no, no. No truth to that whatsoever," says Bannock. "But that doesn't matter as long as you believe it will."

Donachie agrees: "The power of placebo is huge."

THERE IS another major factor with real effects. Early this year, the Italian newspaper *Corriere Della Sera* asked Modrić about the secret to his longevity.

"Love," he replied.

"Loving soccer, thinking about soccer, living for soccer. Next to my family, soccer is the most important thing I have. The secret is passion. Diet and training are secondary ... I'm as happy training today as when I was a kid."

At Leicester, Jamie Vardy was said to prepare for games by downing Red Bull and espresso. True?

"Yes!" says Balsom. "Jamie is an outlier among the outliers. At Leicester, he was so motivated, and he never had a serious injury. The key for the staff working with him was to work with him rather than against him."

Donachie says: "It's not easy being a footballer. It's a grind, training every day, playing all the games, living like a monk. It's the ones who can still enjoy it that have the desire to keep going."

Some players are driven not just by a love of the game but by a fear of what lies ahead. "That transition away from playing is often very difficult," says Donachie. "There's a high divorce rate."

Really?

FROM LEFT: CARMINE LAPORTA/KONTROLAB/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY IMAGES; SALVADOR RODRIGUEZ/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

> "We've got a new era of performance chefs. They're more focused on actual sports **nutrition** as opposed to, 'Let's just throw some more cream in there and make it look amazing.' "

Not in the Carbs

Ronaldo's fans have honored him with pizzas and loaves of bread, but the man himself is more likely to indulge in chicken and salad, prompting one former teammate to quip, "When Cristiano invites you for lunch at his house, just say no."

"Yeah, very high."

In 2015, the charity Xpro estimated that 33% of soccer players divorce within a year of retirement.

"In most cases they can never ever replicate the feeling of scoring a goal at Old Trafford or wherever it might be," says Donachie. "It's a huge period of readjustment."

Donachie has felt this. His dad, Willie, played for Scotland and Manchester City in the '70s. One day when Danny was 13, his dad took him out for a walk with the dog, and told him he was considering stopping playing to become a coach.

"I burst into tears," says Donachie. "The whole identity of the family was tied into this thing of him being a footballer." He says his father ended up playing for five more years.

And so the World Cup stars entering middle age are not solely powered by contraptions, superfoods and fitness gurus. "They know that life as a footballer is going to end soon, and most of them can't handle that," says Bannock.

"Being a player is all they know and it's all they want to be." □

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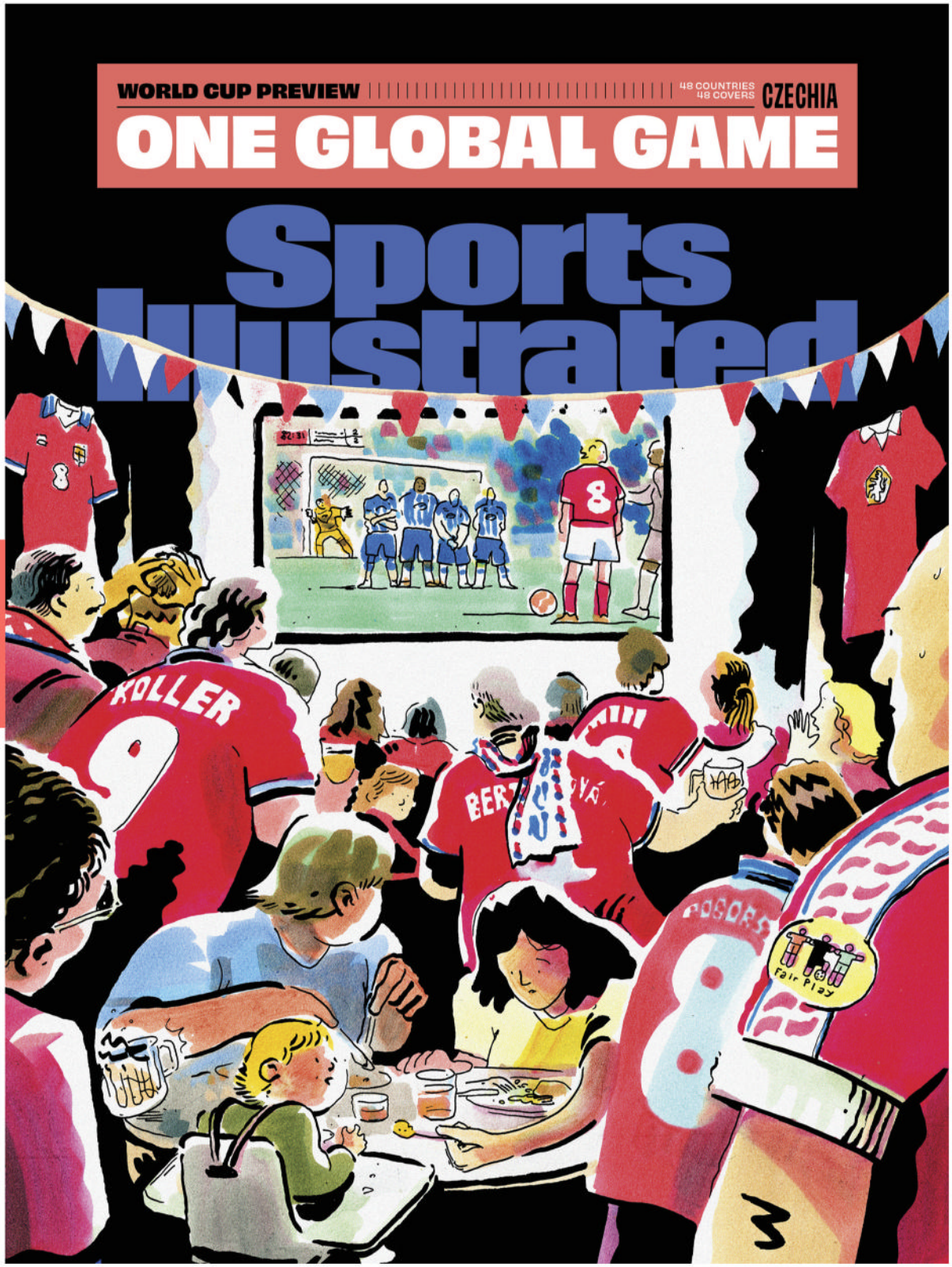
SCOUTING REPORTS

WORLD CUP PREVIEW

The 2026 World Cup will be bigger than ever, thanks to an expanded field that will bring 48 teams (split into a dozen groups of four) to the festivities. With the help of an artist from each nation who was asked to capture the spirit of the game in their homeland, we've got what you need to know about all of the competitors

Kit illustrations by **Martin Laksman**

Illustration by **Jindřich Janíček**



GROUP A

ICONIC MOMENT Three red cards, a keeper playing with a broken arm, extra time and some lenient refereeing: Czechoslovakia's

FIFA RANKING

41

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 10th* • **Last Appearance** 2006 (Group Stage)

Best Finish Runner-up (1934, 1962)

MANAGER

Miroslav Koubek

** includes Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic*

CZECHIA

CONTAINING THIS BIG LINEUP WILL BE A TALL ORDER

CZECHIA'S ROAD to the World Cup was far from straightforward. After finishing second to Croatia in group play, Miroslav Koubek's side survived two nerve-racking playoff penalty shootouts—first against Ireland, then Denmark—to secure its spot. Its first World Cup appearance as Czechia marks the return of a team that is big (five of the 10 outfield players who started against Denmark are at least 6' 3"), physical and dominant in the air. With a resolute defense and towering attacking threats, Czechia will no doubt test every opponent in its group. *—Barnaby Lane*

X-FACTOR

PATRIK SCHICK
Forward

Why will opposing defenses fear the Bayer Leverkusen hitman? At Euro 2020, Schick finished tied with Cristiano Ronaldo as the top scorer and netted the Goal of the Tournament, from the halfway line against Scotland.

BREAKOUT STAR

PAVEL ŠULC
Midfielder

A playmaker with silky feet, Lyon's 2025 signing is reinventing how Czechia creates chances. His vision and blistering form—17 goals and 11 assists in all competitions this season—make him the team's secret weapon.

GROUP A SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/11	MATCH 2 • 6/18	MATCH 3 • 6/24
Zapopan, Mexico	Atlanta	Mexico City
VS	*VS*	*VS*
South Korea	***South Africa***	***Mexico***

LIKELY FINISH

Round of 32

FROM LEFT: MILAN KAMMERMAYER/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; STEPHEN MCCARTHY/SPORTSFILE/GETTY IMAGES

1–1 quarterfinal draw with Brazil (which would go on to win the replayed game) in 1938 is one of the World Cup's wildest matches.

Illustration by **C.R. Canseco**

GROUP A

ICONIC MOMENT *No era penal*. Mexico's 2014 quarterfinal hopes were cruelly ended after a very soft stoppage time

FIFA RANKING 15

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 18th • **Last Appearance** 2022 (Group Stage)

Best Finish Quarterfinals (1970, 1986)

MANAGER

Javier Aguirre

MEXICO

A HIGH-ENERGY EL TRI SIDE HAS HIGH HOPES

MEXICO WILL become the first nation to host the World Cup three times, and its fervent fans will be buoyed by the fact that its best results have come on home soil. Despite years of turmoil and unconvincing performances, manager Javier Aguirre will lead the cohosts for a third time. He has a disciplined side that is short on flair but has a high engine. Only four countries have been to more World Cups, but El Tri has won just 17 matches in 17 appearances. Playing in front of an impatient fan base will not make it easy to significantly add to that total.—*Roberto Casillas*

X-FACTOR

RAÚL JIMÉNEZ
Forward

The striker's remarkable resurgence at Fulham (12 goals last year and nine through 31 games this season) could reach its pinnacle when he plays in his fourth World Cup—if the 35-year-old scores his first tournament goal.

BREAKOUT STAR

GILBERTO MORA
Midfielder

With Mexico's talent drought at its most dire, the Tijuana teen has reinvigorated El Tri's hopes. Still 17 and somewhat injury prone, Mora is a potential generational talent and seems bound for a marquee European move when he turns 18 this fall.

GROUP A SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/11	MATCH 2 • 6/18	MATCH 3 • 6/24
Mexico City	Zapopan, Mexico	Mexico City
VS	*VS*	*VS*
South Africa	***South Korea***	***Czechia***

LIKELY FINISH

Round of 16

FROM L-LEFT: ROBBIE JAY BARRATT/AMA/GETTY IMAGES; HECTOR VIVAS/FIFA/GETTY IMAGES

Rafa Márquez penalty was awarded to the Netherlands, leaving an entire nation to repeat those three words in disbelief.

Illustration by **Studio MUTI**

GROUP

A

ICONIC MOMENT Siphiwe Tshabalala's opening goal against Mexico at the 2010 World Cup in South Africa transcended

FIFA RANKING 60

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 4th • **Last Appearance** 2010 (Group Stage)

Best Finish Group Stage (1998, 2002, 2010)

MANAGER

Hugo Broos

SOUTH AFRICA

GET READY FOR THE RETURN OF THE VUVUZELA

SOUTH AFRICA pulled off a surprise by topping CAF Group C to qualify for the 2026 field, edging out a star-studded Nigeria to return to the tournament for the first time since hosting in 2010. That year, as in their two previous World Cup appearances, Bafana Bafana exited at the group stage, and expectations are again modest this time around. Hugo Broos's squad has drawn a manageable group but lacks top-tier talent. Still, their passionate, horn-blowing fans will no doubt bring the party to North America, no matter how far the team advances. —B.L.

X-FACTOR

RONWEN WILLIAMS
Goalkeeper

Williams saved four Cabo Verde penalties in a shootout at the 2023 Africa Cup of Nations, showing his cool. Can he perform under pressure again? We'll find out when he faces Mexico—and 83,000 screaming fans—at Estadio Azteca in the opener.

BREAKOUT STAR

MBEKEZELI MBOKAZI
Defender

Let's just say nobody will be shoving the Chicago Fire defender off the ball anytime soon. Despite being only 20, this 5'11" man mountain has little respect for his elders and, if given sight of the goal, is likely to let rip with his powerful left foot.

GROUP A SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/11	MATCH 2 • 6/18	MATCH 3 • 6/24
Mexico City	Atlanta	Guadalupe, Mexico
VS	VS	VS
Mexico	Czechia	South Korea

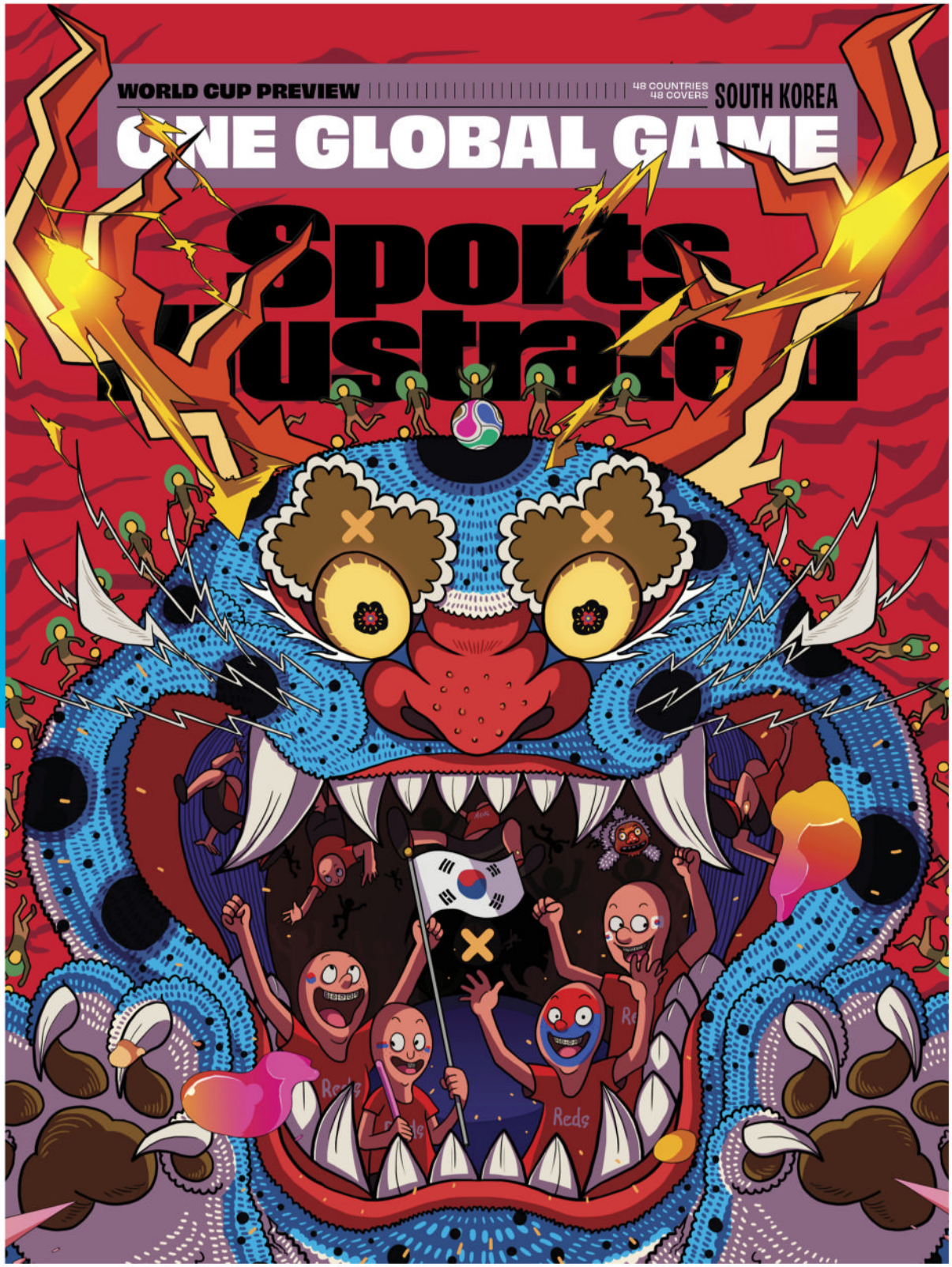
LIKELY FINISH

Group Stage

FROM LEFT: ULRIK PEDERSEN/NURPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES; EJ LANGER/SOCCRATES/GETTY IMAGES

the sport of soccer. "Goal Bafana Bafana! Goal for South Africa! Goal for all Africa!" commentator Peter Drury famously shouted.

Illustration by **Sakiroo**



GROUP A

ICONIC MOMENT Ahn Jung-hwan became a national hero after scoring the golden goal against Italy in the 2002 World Cup

FIFA RANKING 25

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 12th • **Last Appearance** 2022 (Round of 16)

Best Finish Fourth place (2002)

MANAGER

Hong Myung-bo

SOUTH KOREA

THESE WARRIORS WIN BY USING THEIR MINDS

SOUTH KOREA was the only team to go unbeaten in AFC qualifying, with 11 wins and five draws. Without overwhelming opponents, Hong Myung-bo's side, built on a disciplined back three, was tough to break down. The Taegeuk Warriors are organized, patient in possession and strike at the right moment, often through their wingbacks. That measured approach is one Hong will carry into the summer, aiming to outthink rather than outmuscle the competition. Matching the country's fourth-place finish in 2002 may be ambitious, but a favorable group offers hope. —B.L.

FROM L-R: CHUNG SUNG-JUN/GETTY IMAGES; HAN MYUNG-GU/GETTY IMAGES

X-FACTOR

SON HEUNG-MIN
Forward

Now entering the twilight of his career, the 33-year-old remains South Korea's talisman. The Los Angeles FC star has the skills to unlock any defense and will be motivated to make amends after a disappointing 2022 World Cup.

BREAKOUT STAR

YANG MIN-HYEOK
Midfielder

If Son is South Korea's present, then here is its future. The explosive young winger—also blessed with a keen eye for goal—shattered records in the K League before being snapped up by Tottenham Hotspur—Son's former club no less—in 2024.

GROUP A SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/11	MATCH 2 • 6/18	MATCH 3 • 6/24
Zapopan, Mexico	Zapopan, Mexico	Guadalupe, Mexico
VS	*VS*	*VS*
Czechia	***Mexico***	***South Africa***

LIKELY FINISH

Round of 16

round of 16. The strike, though, infuriated Italian fans and his club, Serie A side Perugia, which famously tore up his contract.

Illustration by **Natasa Jovanic**

GROUP B

FUN FACT Bosnia and Herzegovina faces the most grueling travel schedule of the entire group stage, playing in three cities

FIFA RANKING 65

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 2nd • **Last Appearance** 2014 (Group Stage)

Best Finish 2014 (Group Stage)

MANAGER

Sergej Barbarez

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

THE DRAGONS WILL LEAN ON A FIERY VET

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA nearly blew it three times during qualifying, giving up a 77th-minute equalizer on the final matchday, getting outplayed by Wales in the playoff semifinal and then needing a late goal and penalties to beat a 10-man Italy team. In years past, Bosnia developed gifted central playmakers, but this team is more practical and functional, doing much of its damage by whipping in crosses to Edin Džeko. The ageless striker has 73 goals for his country; the rest of the lineup that featured in March has a combined 17. *—Jamie Spencer*

X-FACTOR

EDIN DŽEKO
Forward

With more than 1,000 career appearances (club and international) and over 450 goals, this is the ultimate swan song for the 40-year-old. But don't mistake him for an old-timer out for one last ride: He scored six times during qualifying.

BREAKOUT STAR

ESMIR BAJRAKTAREVIĆ
Midfielder

It's unusual for a young player to look so comfortable at the senior level, but the 21-year-old Wisconsin-born PSV winger gives off serious confidence vibes. He's difficult to brush off the ball, always looking for the killer pass and an accurate shooter.

GROUP B SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/12	MATCH 2 • 6/18	MATCH 3 • 6/24
Toronto	Inglewood, Calif.	Seattle
VS Canada	VS Switzerland	VS Qatar

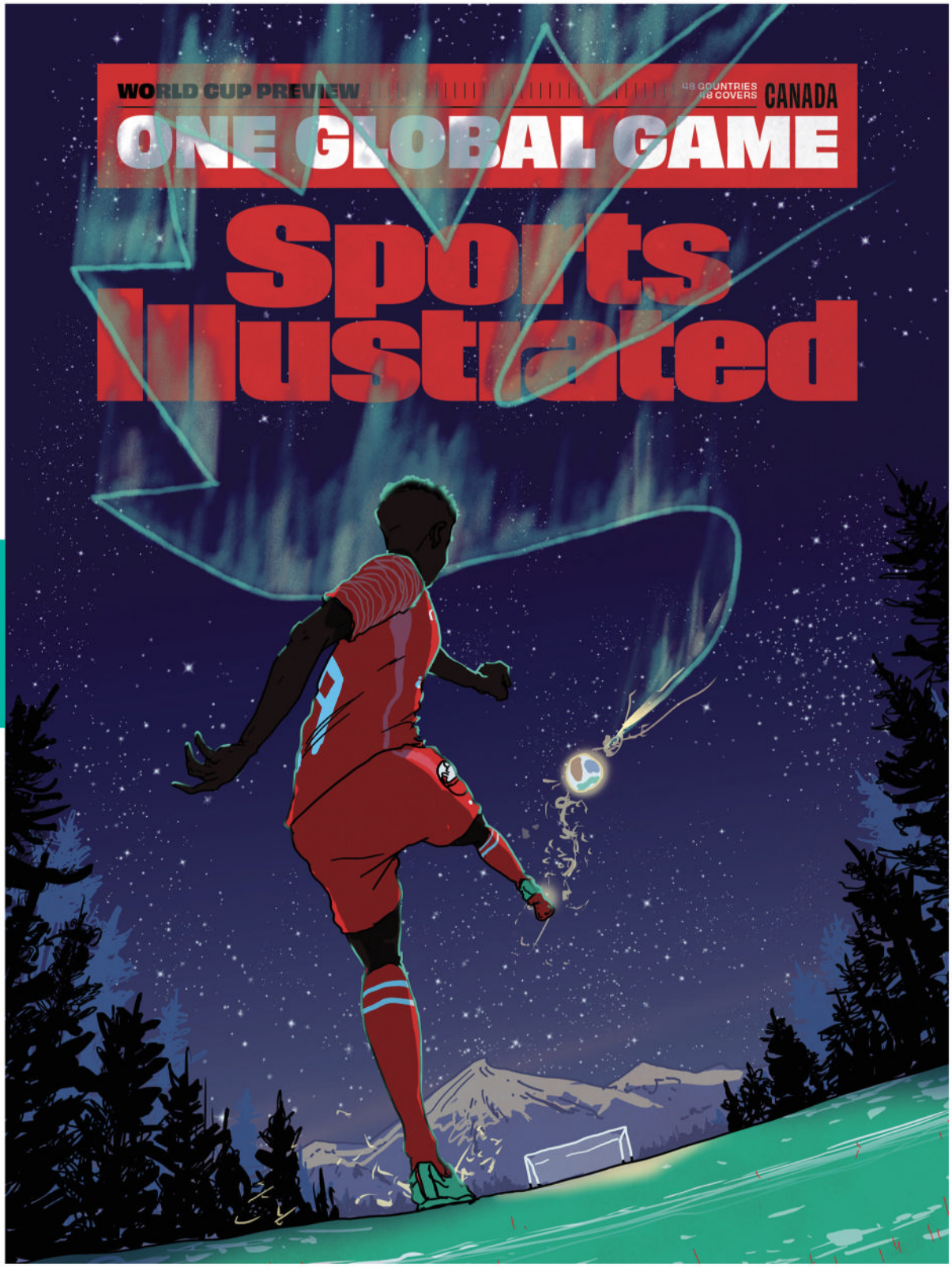
LIKELY FINISH

Round of 32

FROM L-LEFT: DAVID DAVIES/PA IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; IMAGE PHOTO AGENCY/GETTY IMAGES

spanning coast to coast. Starting out in Toronto and heading to Los Angeles and Seattle will total more than 3,100 miles.

Illustration by **Michael Byers**



GROUP B

ICONIC MOMENT It took Canada five World Cup matches to score, so imagine the delight when Alphonso Davies headed

FIFA RANKING 30

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 3rd • **Last Appearances** 2022 (Group Stage)

Best Finish Group Stage (1986, 2022)

MANAGER

Jesse Marsch

CANADA

HISTORY COULD BE MADE NORTH OF THE BORDER

DON'T BE surprised to see fans running into the streets if their team picks up a single point: Canada has lost each of its previous six World Cup matches. But with the feverish pace of Alphonso Davies, the goalscoring confidence of Jonathan David and the stepovers of Tajon Buchanan, another shutout seems unlikely. With home field advantage in Toronto and Vancouver, manager Jesse Marsch hopes the pesky, high-pressing style that led his team to the 2024 Copa América semis against reigning World Cup champ Argentina will ignite a feverish campaign. —*Ben Steiner*

X-FACTOR

JONATHAN DAVID
Forward

Any attacker who goes by the nickname Iceman can be relied upon to keep his cool under pressure in front of the goal. Expect the 26-year-old Juventus forward (who was born in New York City) to be a factor in a potential dark-horse run for Canada.

BREAKOUT STAR

ISMAËL KONÉ
Midfielder

After a rough one-year stint at Marseille that saw him rarely play and get loaned to Rennes, the flashy central midfielder has rediscovered his verve at Sassuolo in Serie A. The 24-year-old is a dynamic runner with the ball.

GROUP B SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/12	MATCH 2 • 6/18	MATCH 3 • 6/24
Toronto	Vancouver	Vancouver
VS	VS	VS
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Qatar	Switzerland

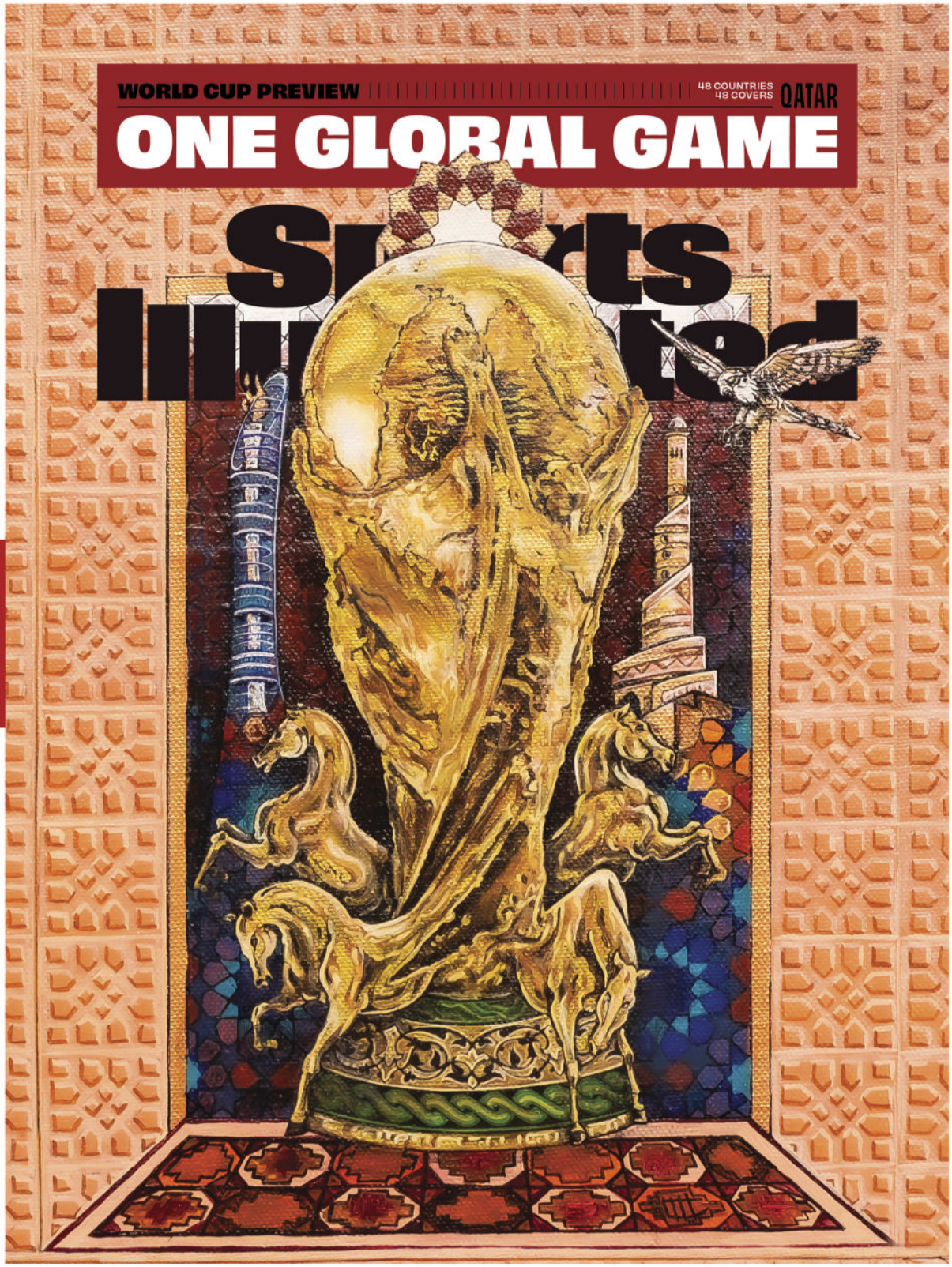
LIKELY FINISH

Round of 32

FROM LEFT: CATHERINE IVILL/AMA/GETTY IMAGES; STEVE LIMENTANI/ISI PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

home 67 seconds into its 2022 match against Croatia. The less said about the subsequent four Croatian goals, the better.

Illustration by **Diyar Al Asadi**



GROUP B

FUN FACT Qatar arrives at the World Cup as reigning Asian champion after winning the last two AFC Asian Cups, in 2019

FIFA RANKING 55

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 2nd • **Last Appearance** 2022 (Group Stage)

Best Finish Group Stage (2022)

MANAGER

Julen Lopetegui

QATAR

THE HOSTS WITH THE MOST (LOSSES) CAN ONLY GET BETTER

IN 2022, Qatar became the worst performing host nation in World Cup history, losing all three of its matches. The team has a few players who are accomplished pros in the Persian Gulf region, but they haven't been tested much on a wider international scale. That showed when Qatar couldn't keep pace with fellow World Cup sides Iran and Uzbekistan during qualifying. Manager Julen Lopetegui is also short on World Cup experience: He was sacked by Spain on the eve of the 2018 tournament for negotiating with Real Madrid behind his federation's back. —J.S.

X-FACTOR

AKRAM AFIF
Midfielder

A prolific scorer for top Qatari club Al Sadd, Afif was named Best Footballer in Asia in 2024. The right-footed 29-year-old, who plays on the left side, confounds defenders: He has 40 international goals, second most in Qatar's history.

BREAKOUT STAR

MOHAMED AL-MANNAI
Midfielder

In order for Afif to flourish, there needs to be a creative force behind him fashioning opportunities. That's the role of the 22-year-old midfielder who was named the best Under-23 player by the Qatar FA in 2024–25.

GROUP B SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/13	MATCH 2 • 6/18	MATCH 3 • 6/24
Santa Clara, Calif.	Vancouver	Seattle
VS	*VS*	*VS*
Switzerland	***Canada***	***Bosnia and Herzegovina***

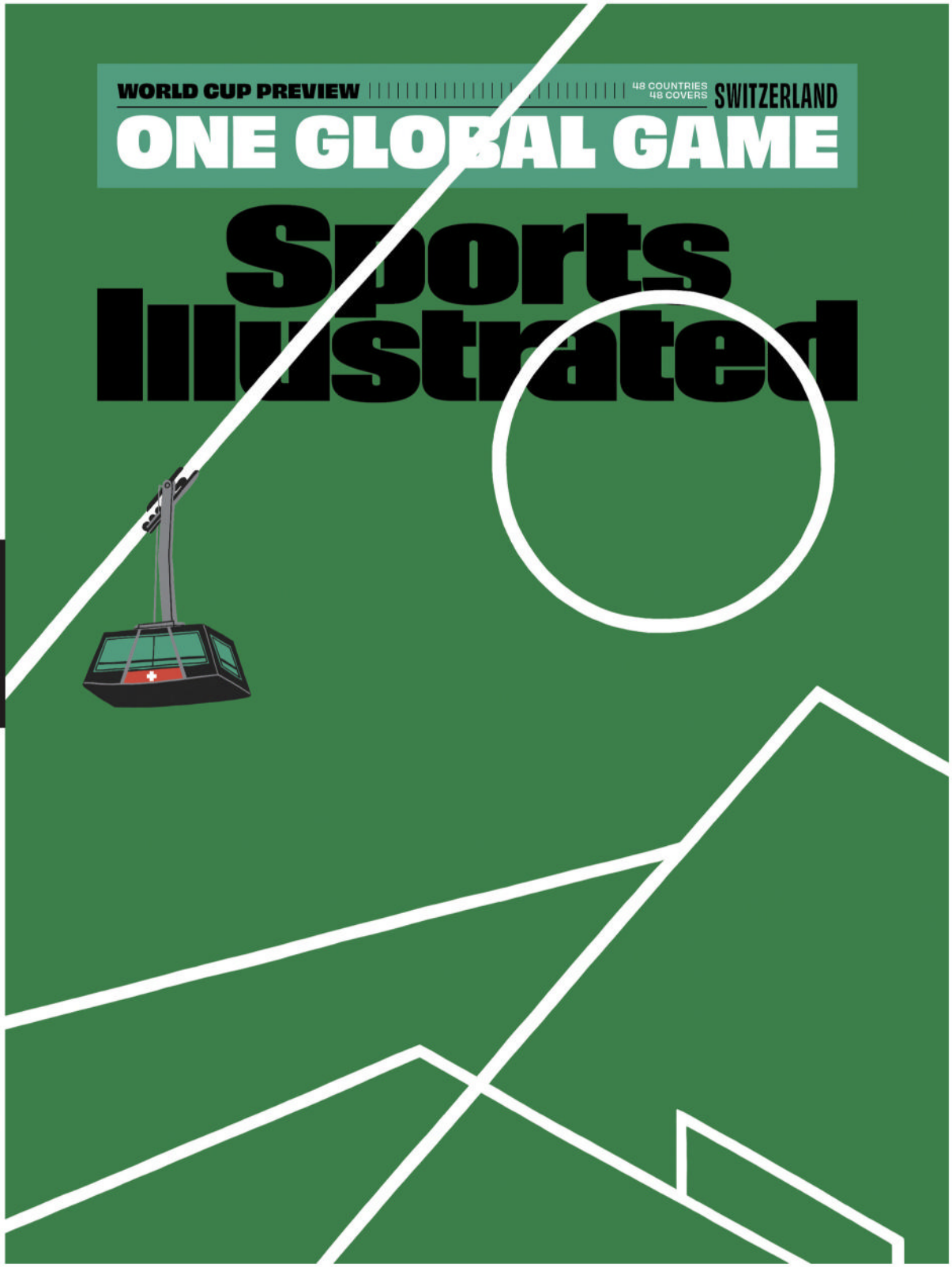
LIKELY FINISH

Group Stage

FROM LEFT: NOUSHAD THEKKAYIL/NURPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES; NOUSHAD THEKKAYIL/NURPHOTO/SHUTTERSTOCK

and '23. Remarkably, the team had never so much as gotten past the quarterfinals in nine earlier appearances at the tournament.

Illustration by **Maria Grejc**



GROUP B

ICONIC MOMENT Switzerland's best chance at making the World Cup semifinals wilted in 104° heat in 1954. As hosts, the

FIFA RANKING 19

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 13th • **Last Appearance** 2022 (Round of 16)

Best Finish Quarterfinals (1934, 1938, 1954)

MANAGER

Murat Yakin

SWITZERLAND

DON'T SLEEP ON THE HUMBLE SWISS

SWITZERLAND HAS has long been an unspectacular force on the World Cup stage, a regular attendee to the party that often departs before the cake has been cut. Manager Murat Yakin's team has gone out in the first knockout stage in each of the past three tournaments. Hopes to go deeper are made possible by a wise and experienced group: What they lack in flair and individualism, they more than make up for in organization, camaraderie and an unassuming reputation that often lulls opponents into a false sense of security. *—Ewan Ross-Murray*

X-FACTOR

GRANIT XHAKA
Midfielder

Once known as a hot-headed liability at Arsenal, the Swiss captain has rebuilt his reputation. Technical yet tenacious, he led Bayer Leverkusen to a domestic double in 2023–24 and has continued his renaissance at Sunderland.

BREAKOUT STAR

JOHAN MANZAMBI
Midfielder

Xhaka's talented mentee has the ability to dazzle audiences. The 20-year-old has scored three times in just 10 caps for the Swiss and has impressed at SC Freiburg with his precision passing, direct running and finishing.

GROUP B SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/13	MATCH 2 • 6/18	MATCH 3 • 6/24
Santa Clara, Calif.	Inglewood, Calif.	Vancouver
VS Qatar	VS Bosnia and Herzegovina	VS Canada

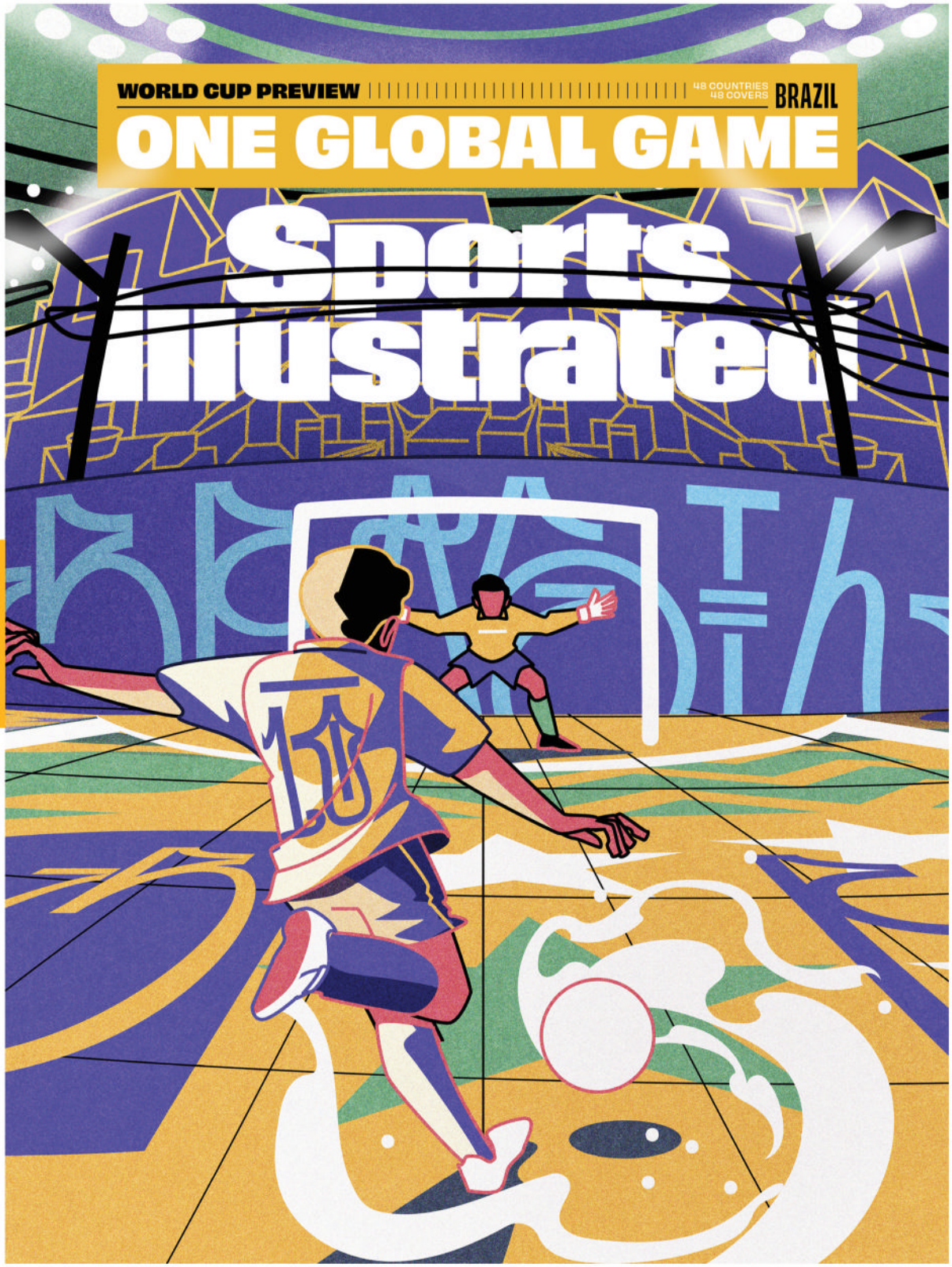
LIKELY FINISH

Round of 16

FABRICE COFFRINI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (2)

Swiss surrendered a three-goal lead to an Austria side that prevailed 7–5 in what remains the highest-scoring World Cup match.

Illustration by **Denis Freitas**



GROUP

G

ICONIC MOMENT A jaw-dropping goal against Italy capped Brazil's third World Cup in 1970. Seven players contributed in

FIFA RANKING 6

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 23rd • **Last Appearance** 2022 (Quarterfinals)

Best Finish Champion (1958, 1962, 1970, 1994, 2002)

MANAGER

Carlo Ancelotti

BRAZIL

THE SELEÇÃO ARE EMBRACING TEAMWORK

BRAZIL MIGHT be the most successful team in World Cup history, but it has only one semifinal appearance since 2002. Manager Carlo Ancelotti is slowly transforming a squad of individual stars, with varying levels of experience, into a cohesive unit. Despite the big names headlining the attack, Brazil does not punish opponents with a flurry of goals. Instead, the Seleção bide their time before picking the perfect moment to strike. Having a world-class goalkeeper, Liverpool's Alisson Becker, helps the team secure narrow yet comfortable results. *—Amanda Langell*

X-FACTOR

VINÍCIUS JÚNIOR
Forward

An absolute menace in the final third, the speedster loves to make a mockery of defenders. Reunited with Ancelotti, his manager at Real Madrid for four seasons, Vini Jr. is poised to finally translate his club form to the national team.

BREAKOUT STAR

ESTÊVÃO
Midfielder

Only a special player draws comparisons to Neymar, succeeds at Chelsea and garners praise from the tough Ancelotti before turning 19. With Real Madrid's Rodrygo out with a torn ACL, Brazil will rely on Estêvão, who has his own injury issues.

GROUP C SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/13	MATCH 2 • 6/19	MATCH 3 • 6/24
East Rutherford, N.J.	Philadelphia	Miami
VS Morocco	VS Haiti	VS Scotland

LIKELY FINISH

Semifinals

FROM L-EFT: RICHARD CALLIS/SPORTS PRESS PHOTO/GETTY IMAGES; MAURO PIMENTEL/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

the buildup to Carlos Alberto's thunderous strike in a 4–1 win that gave Brazil permanent possession of the Jules Rimet trophy.

Illustration by **Lyne Lucien**

GROUP C

FUN FACT Sébastien Migné oversaw Haiti's qualification without ever setting foot in the country. The Frenchman (who was

FIFA RANKING
83

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 2nd • **Last Appearance** 1974 (Group Stage)

Best Finish Group Stage (1974)

MANAGER

Sébastien Migné

HAITI

THE FEEL-GOOD STORY OF THE TOURNAMENT

A TINY island immersed in social and economic turmoil, Haiti defied the odds to end its 52-year-long wait and become the first Caribbean nation to qualify for a second World Cup. The melting pot roster (for instance, Sunderland striker Wilson Isidor, who scored in his first start for Haiti in March, was born in France) matches the island's identity, and even more dual nationals could join the cause to improve a team that will be playing with house money. Les Grenadiers are far from favorites, but their presence is a love letter to the nation's unbreakable resilience. —R.C.

X-FACTOR

JEAN-RICNER BELLEGARDE
Midfielder

Convincing the Wolverhampton attacking midfielder to switch his allegiance from France was a defining moment in Haiti's World Cup journey. Bellegarde's visionary play has made him a mainstay in the middle of the park.

BREAKOUT STAR

JOSUÉ CASIMIR
Midfielder

Called up to the Haiti roster for the first time last October, the Guadeloupe-born playmaker—now with AJ Auxerre—is a handful on the right side. Casimir provided the assist on the winning goal in the final qualifier, which punched the squad's ticket.

GROUP C SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/13	MATCH 2 • 6/19	MATCH 3 • 6/24
Foxborough, Mass.	Philadelphia	Atlanta
VS **Scotland**	*VS* **Brazil**	*VS* **Morocco**

LIKELY FINISH

Group Stage

appointed as manager in 2024) and his team were forced to play their "home" matches 500 miles away, in Willemstad, Curaçao.

FROM L-LEFT: EZEQUIEL BECERRA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; VAUGHN RIDLEY/GETTY IMAGES

Illustration by **Mohamed Elwaid**

GROUP

ICONIC MOMENT Youssef En-Nesyri's stunning 42nd-minute header—the lone goal in Morocco's win against Portugal in

FIFA RANKING 8

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 7th • **Last Appearance** 2022 (Fourth Place)

Best Finish Fourth Place (2022)

MANAGER

Mohamed Ouahbi

MOROCCO

THE ATLAS LIONS ARE READY TO ROAR

MOROCCO HAS provided its share of highs (becoming the the first African team to reach the World Cup semis in 2022, a perfect qualifying campaign for this tournament) and lows (a humbling round of 16 loss to lowly Benin at the 2019 Africa Cup of Nations, needing a forfeit to win the AFCON final in January on home turf). New manager Mohamed Ouahbi—who preaches discipline—doesn't have any experience at the senior international level, but he does have some hardware: He led Morocco to the 2025 U-20 World Cup championship. —R.C.

FROM LEFT: ULRIK PEDERSEN/NURPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES; TORBJORN TANDE/DEFODI IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

X-FACTOR

ACHRAF HAKIMI
Defender

Morocco has one of the best fullbacks in the world on its right flank. A 2025 Champions League winner with PSG, Hakimi loves to set up his teammates (three assists in qualifying) almost as much as he loves going on lung-busting runs.

BREAKOUT STAR

ILIAS AKHOMACH
Midfielder

The 22-year-old can make an impact off the bench, often playing on the right and cutting inside with his preferred left foot. Having trained at Barcelona for six years when he was a teenager, Akhomach is now with Rayo Vallecano in La Liga.

GROUP C SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/13	MATCH 2 • 6/19	MATCH 3 • 6/24
East Rutherford, N.J.	Foxborough, Mass.	Atlanta
VS Brazil	VS Scotland	VS Haiti

LIKELY FINISH

Quarterfinals

the quarterfinals—is one of the defining images of the 2022 World Cup. That, and Cristiano Ronaldo's postgame tears.

Illustration by **Want Some Studio**

GROUP

ICONIC MOMENT The greatest goal of Scotland's greatest Cup performance—Archie Gemmill's against the Netherlands

FIFA RANKING 43

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 9th • **Last Appearance** 1998 (Group Stage)

Best Finish Group Stage (1954, 1958, 1974, 1978, 1982, 1986, 1990, 1998)

MANAGER

Steve Clarke

SCOTLAND

THE TARTAN ARMY IS ON THE MARCH

SCOTLAND ERUPTED in celebration—and then breathed a collective sigh of relief—after scoring two stoppage-time goals to beat Denmark 4–2 on the final day of qualifying to reach the 2026 World Cup. Is there enough magic left to make it to the knockout stage for the first time? Steve Clarke's team won't wow anyone with free-flowing, beautiful play. But it is particularly effective in physical, chaotic games, where its energy, direct play and set-piece prowess can disrupt opponents. Grinding out one win might be enough to advance. —B.L.

X-FACTOR

SCOTT McTOMINAY
Midfielder

Once a Man U holding midfielder, he has reinvented himself into an elite playmaker and goal-scoring threat at Napoli. McTominay has a way of delivering when his country needs him the most, such as his bicycle kick goal in the decisive qualifier.

BREAKOUT STAR

BEN GANNON-DOAK
Forward

Quick and fearless with the ball at his feet, the Bournemouth forward is the kind of old-fashioned winger that fullbacks hate to come up against—especially if the 20-year-old is used as an impact substitute against tiring defensive legs.

GROUP C SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/13	MATCH 2 • 6/19	MATCH 3 • 6/24
Foxborough, Mass.	Foxborough, Mass.	Miami
VS Haiti	VS Morocco	VS Brazil

LIKELY FINISH

Group Stage

FROM L-R: ANDREW MILLIGAN/PA IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; CRAIG FOY/SNS GROUP/GETTY IMAGES

in 1978, where he dribbled past three players and chipped the keeper—is shown on a loop at the Scottish Football Museum.

Illustration by **Andrew Archer**

GROUP D

ICONIC MOMENT Australia returned to the big stage in 2006 with Guus Hiddink at the helm. Trailing Japan 1–0 with six

FIFA RANKING 27

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 7th • **Last Appearance** 2022 (Round of 16)

Best Finish Round of 16 (2006, 2022)

MANAGER

Tony Popovic

AUSTRALIA

THE SOCCEROOS ARE PRIMED FOR A JUMP FORWARD

BEHIND ITS Golden Generation, Australia reached a World Cup round of 16 for the first time in 2006. A key member of that team was center back Tony Popovic, whose tournament was cut short by a calf injury. Now he's leading his country's next generation, one that surprisingly reached the knockout stage in Qatar. Popovic has preached sound organization, allowing the Socceroos to strike on the counterattack. The team is light on technically skilled players, but the discipline the former defender has instilled makes the Aussies tough to crack. *—James Cormack*

X-FACTOR

MATHEW RYAN
Goalkeeper

The most familiar Aussie player is the team's keeper, who has had stints in Spain, England, the Netherlands and France. Ryan is an impressive shot stopper, particularly from the penalty spot, and is also known for his distrubution.

BREAKOUT STAR

NESTORY IRANKUNDA
Forward

The 20-year-old, a former Bayern Munich product, is the perfect attacking outlet for a team whose success is predicated on a tidy defense while maximizing limited attacking moments. Irankunda is also an impact threat from set pieces.

GROUP D SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/13	MATCH 2 • 6/19	MATCH 3 • 6/25
Vancouver	Seattle	Santa Clara, Calif.
VS	VS	VS
Türkiye	United States	Paraguay

LIKELY FINISH

Round of 32

FROM LEFT: DUSTIN BRADFORD/GETTY IMAGES; MAYA THOMPSON/GETTY IMAGES

minutes left in the group stage opener, substitute Tim Cahill scored twice to help seal the Socceroos' first World Cup victory.

Illustration by **Fafo Ferrão**

GROUP D

FUN FACT Not satisfied with being an accomplished shot stopper, in 1998 José Luis Chilavert became the first goalkeeper

FIFA RANKING 40

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 9th • **Last Appearance** 2010 (Quarterfinals)

Best Finish Quarterfinals (2010)

MANAGER

Gustavo Alfaro

PARAGUAY

DON'T EXPECT GOALFESTS WITH LA ALBIRROJA

PARAGUAY WAS one of the unexpected success stories of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, making a stirring run to the quarterfinals before losing to eventual champion Spain. Then came a 16-year exile, one that finally ended thanks to a CONMEBOL qualifying campaign that saw the team concede just 10 goals in 18 games. Alas, La Albirroja only scored 14. Paraguay's hopes will rest on its tenacious midfield and back line—anchored by the center back pairing of captain Gustavo Gómez and Sunderland star Omar Alderete—remaining impregnable. —A.L.

X-FACTOR

MIGUEL ALMIRÓN
Midfielder

Now in his second go-round with Atlanta United (a seven-year stint in Newcastle was sandwiched in between), the 32-year-old has shown no signs of slowing, picking up three assists in the MLS club's first seven games.

BREAKOUT STAR

DIEGO GÓMEZ
Midfielder

MLS fans will remember Gómez playing alongside Lionel Messi at Inter Miami. Now a Premier League regular at Brighton, the box-to-box midfielder is brimming with energy and, at six feet, 170 pounds, plenty of physicality.

GROUP D SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/12	MATCH 2 • 6/20	MATCH 3 • 6/25
Inglewood, Calif.	Santa Clara, Calif.	Santa Clara, Calif.
VS	VS	VS
United States	Türkiye	Australia

LIKELY FINISH

Group Stage

FROM L-R: VINCENT CARCHIETTA/GETTY IMAGES; ETSUO HARA/GETTY IMAGES

to take a direct free kick in a World Cup, against Bulgaria. It was Paraguay's best chance in what ended up as a 0–0 draw.

Illustration by **Tayfun Pekdemir**

GROUP D

ICONIC MOMENT Türkiye's entire 2002 World Cup was unforgettable, but nothing tops Hakan Şükür's blink-and-you'll-miss-it

FIFA RANKING 22

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 3rd • **Last Appearance** 2002 (Third Place)

Best Finish Third Place (2002)

MANAGER

Vincenzo Montella

TÜRKIYE

THE CRESCENT STARS LACK STAR POWER

TÜRKIYE IS the epitome of a team whose style mirrors the makeup of its squad. Vincenzo Montella's side weds the flair of its exciting young attackers with strong, mature defensive discipline. Without the ball, Türkiye is compact and hard-working. In possession, however, it becomes a very different story. With Hakan Çalhanŏglu dictating the tempo in the midfield, the Crescent Stars are comfortable patiently controlling the ball before striking. The team's weakness is the lack of a natural striker; an elite forward could take Türkiye to the next level. —B.L.

FROM L-R: ALEX NICODIM/NURPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES; JUAN MANUEL SERRANO ARCE/GETTY IMAGES

X-FACTOR

ARDA GÜLER
Midfielder

At just 21, the Real Madrid wunderkind is already Türkiye's main man. Whether deployed centrally or out wide, he can conjure magic in an instant—curling shots into the top corner or threading passes that unlock even the tightest defenses.

BREAKOUT STAR

BARIŞ ALPER YILMAZ
Forward

Galatasaray's versatile winger is the epitome of an under-the-radar player. If the 26-year-old can replicate his electrifying displays at the club level for Türkiye, expect his reputation—and appeal to bigger clubs—to soar.

GROUP D SCHEDULE

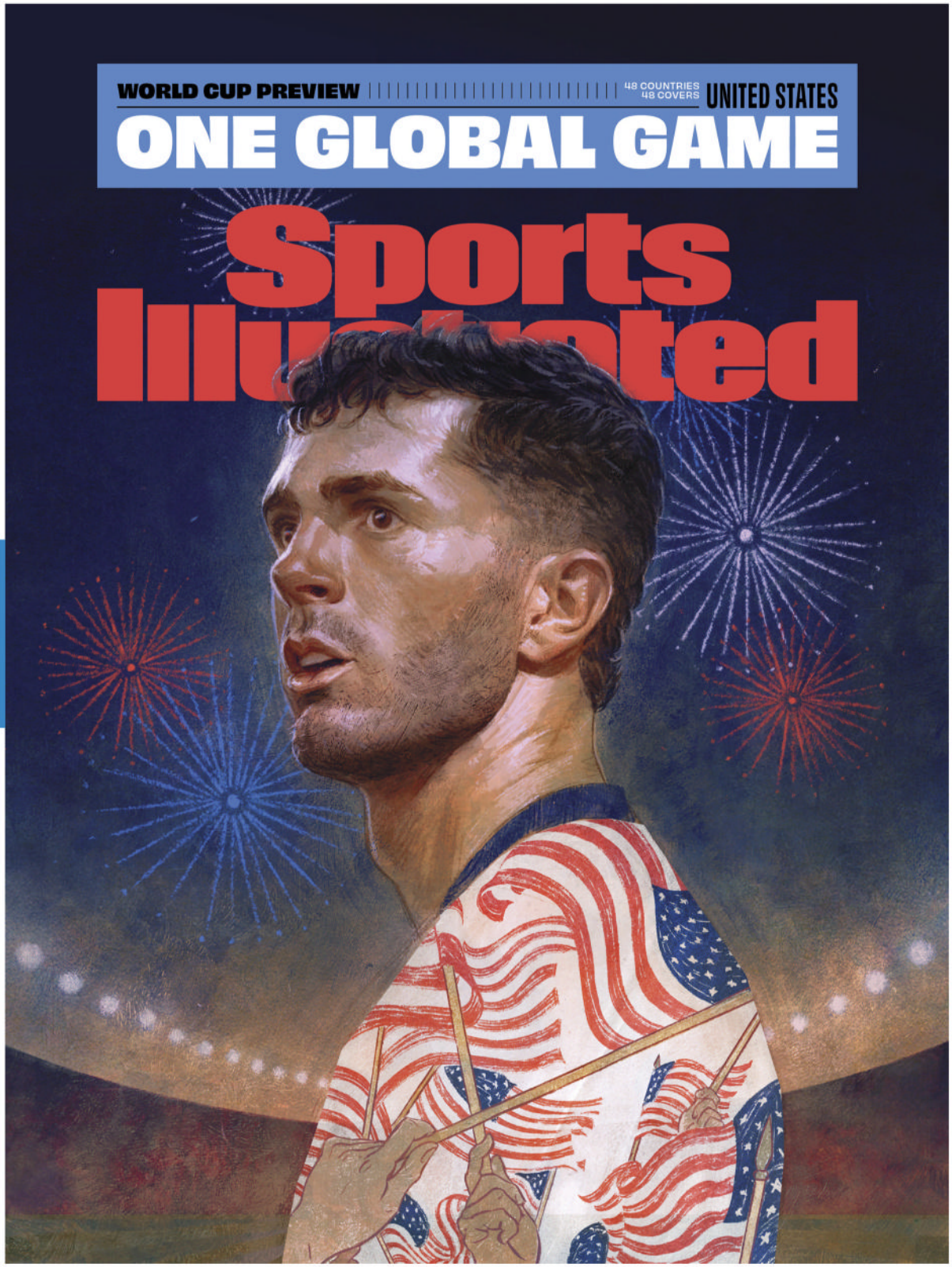
MATCH 1 • 6/13	MATCH 2 • 6/19	MATCH 3 • 6/25
Vancouver	Santa Clara, Calif.	Inglewood, Calif.
VS	VS	VS
Australia	Paraguay	United States

LIKELY FINISH

Round of 16

strike 10.8 seconds into his team's victory in the third-place game against South Korea, the fastest goal in tournament history.

Illustration by **Nate Sweitzer**



GROUP D

ICONIC MOMENT Forwards Brian McBride and Landon Donovan scored the goals in a chippy 2–0 win over Mexico that

FIFA RANKING 16

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 12th • **Last Appearance** 2022 (Round of 16)

Best Finish Semifinals (1930)

MANAGER

Mauricio Pochettino

UNITED STATES

HOME COULD BE VERY SWEET FOR THE YANKS

WILL THIS be the summer that U.S. fans are rewarded for optimisticaly chanting "I believe that we will win" for years? Highlighted by Christian Pulisic's dynamic play down the wing and Weston McKennie's Swiss Army knife abilities in midfield, the cohosts have plenty of talent. It will be up to ever-confident manager Mauricio Pochettino to make the most of it. One thing that doesn't inspire confidence is the team's ability to eclipse its 2002 quarterfinal surge: The U.S. lost its first two friendlies of 2026 by a combined score of 7–2. At home. —B.S.

X-FACTOR

CHRISTIAN PULISIC
Forward

The AC Milan forward has game-breaking qualities: smooth, incisive dribbling and an ability to exploit space. But he hasn't scored a goal for the USMNT since November 2024, and he will find himself under extreme pressure to deliver on home soil.

BREAKOUT STAR

ALEX FREEMAN
Defender

Fresh off a move to La Liga's Villarreal after starring with Orlando City (where he was the MLS Young Player of the Year in 2025), the 21-year-old is a pacy right back who loves to get forward. His finishing ability is more akin to an attacker.

GROUP D SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/12	MATCH 2 • 6/19	MATCH 3 • 6/25
Inglewood, Calif.	Seattle	Inglewood, Calif.
VS	VS	VS
Paraguay	Australia	Türkiye

LIKELY FINISH

Round of 16

FROM L-R: RICH VON BIBERSTEIN/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES; ANDREW J. CLARK/ISI PHOTOS/USSF/GETTY IMAGES

sent the United States to the 2002 World Cup quarterfinals and cemented the "Dos a Cero" legend that lives on to this day.

Illustration by **Ngadi Smart**

GROUP

E

FUN FACT If Les Éléphants end up in a penalty shootout, get comfy: Two of Côte d'Ivoire's three AFCON finals victories

FIFA RANKING 34

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 4th • **Last Appearance** 2014 (Group Stage)

Best Finish Group Stage (2006, 2010, 2014)

MANAGER

Emerse Faé

CÔTE D'IVOIRE

LES ÉLÉPHANTS WILL BE UP TO THE TUSK. ER, TASK

DIDIER DROGBA and the Touré brothers—Yaya and Kolo—led Côte d'Ivoire to three straight World Cups between 2006 and 2014, but without those national heroes Les Éléphants never made it back again, until now. Those teams never moved past the group stage, but during qualifying this squad showed it has the grit to win tight games. Côte d'Ivoire didn't concede a goal in 10 matches, but five of its eight wins were 1–0 or 2–0. Credit that to coach Emerse Faé, who has instilled a more patient approach to a team that previously had a reputation for being chaotic. —J.S.

X-FACTOR

AMAD DIALLO
Forward

It took a while after he made headlines with a $45 million transfer in 2021 to Manchester United, but Amad is finally a starter for his country. He usually plays on the right but is naturally two-footed, wonderfully versatile and wholly unpredictable.

BREAKOUT STAR

YAN DIOMANDÉ
Forward

One of European soccer's most talked-about talents, the 19-year-old left winger bursts with explosive pace, has created and converted chances at will for RB Leipzig and routinely headlines transfer gossip columns.

GROUP E SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/14 Philadelphia	MATCH 2 • 6/20 Toronto	MATCH 3 • 6/25 Philadelphia
VS **Ecuador**	*VS* **Germany**	*VS* **Curaçao**

LIKELY FINISH

Round of 32

ULRIK PEDERSEN/NURPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES (2)

came on shootouts that lasted at least 11 rounds—meaning that, yes, even the goalkeepers had to step up to the spot.

Illustration by **BLEND, Sander van Beusekom**

GROUP E

FUN FACT MetLife Stadium, the site of the 2026 World Cup final, could accommodate nearly half of Curaçao's population

FIFA RANKING 82

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 1st (tournament debut)

Top International Result Quarterfinals, 2019 Gold Cup

MANAGER Fred Rutten

CURAÇAO

THE BLUE WAVE ARE THE ULTIMATE UNDERDOGS

YES, CURAÇAO will be the smallest nation ever to compete at the World Cup in terms of population and land mass, but underestimate the Blue Wave at your own peril (they didn't lose a single game in Concacaf's 18-month-long qualifying journey). As an independent territory of the Netherlands, Curaçao's talent comes from a rich diaspora (only one player on the roster to secure qualification was born and raised on the island). However, the team's hopes took a hit when 78-year-old coach Dick Advocaat opted to resign instead of leading a third different nation at the World Cup. —R.C.

X-FACTOR

TAHITH CHONG
Midfielder

The former Netherlands youth international—who played for Man U and now is at Sheffield United—switched allegiances in 2025 and wasted little time making an impact, scoring a pair of goals in his first start for Curaçao last September.

BREAKOUT STAR

LIVANO COMENENCIA
Midfielder

Tall, strong, agile and multiskilled, the 22-year-old former Juventus and PSV Eindhoven youth product anchors the midfield for the Blue Wave but also can drop into the back line to allow the team's fullbacks to dart forward in transition.

GROUP E SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/14	MATCH 2 • 6/20	MATCH 3 • 6/25
Houston	Kansas City, Mo.	Philadelphia
VS	VS	VS
Germany	Ecuador	Côte d'Ivoire

LIKELY FINISH

Group Stage

FROM LEFT: ANDY CHEUNG/GETTY IMAGES; LYNDSAY RADNEDGE/ISI PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

of 185,000. The island itself is roughly a quarter the size of Houston, where the Blue Wave plays its World Cup opener.

Illustration by **Cavadrio**

GROUP

E

FUN FACT Despite expressing interest, Ecuador ultimately declined FIFA's invitation to the inaugural 1930 World Cup in

FIFA RANKING 23

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 5th • **Last Appearance** 2022 (Group Stage)

Best Finish Round of 16 (2006)

MANAGER

Sebastián Beccacece

ECUADOR

LA TRICOLOR WILL RELY ON A PAIR OF BLUES

ECUADOR KNOWS a bit about being overlooked and counted out when often stacked against South American powerhouses like Argentina and Brazil. Yet while the world wasn't looking, Sebastián Beccacece molded his team (which finished second in qualifying, ahead of Brazil) into a defensive force that's capable of keeping the biggest names and best nations quiet thanks to its tactical discipline and aggressive approach without the ball. Ecuador's elite back line also fuels La Tri's build-up play, forging a system and an identity that could force the world to take notice. —A.L.

FROM LEFT: RODRIGO BUENDIA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; JOHN DORTON/ISI PHOTOS/USSF/GETTY IMAGES

X-FACTOR

MOISÉS CAICEDO
Midfielder

Arguably the Premier League's best midfielder, the Diamond of Ecuador is a destroyer with a knack for scoring world-class goals. His defensive work and distribution have been well worth the $147 million transfer fee Chelsea paid for him in 2023.

BREAKOUT STAR

KENDRY PÁEZ
Midfielder

While Páez hasn't yet established himself in Chelsea's current plans—the teenager was loaned to Argenitne side River Plate in January—his wizardy on the ball alone gets him to the World Cup, where he will be looking to turn the hype into reality.

GROUP E SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/14	MATCH 2 • 6/20	MATCH 3 • 6/25
Philadelphia	Kansas City, Mo.	East Rutherford, N.J.
VS Côte d'Ivoire	VS Curaçao	VS Germany

LIKELY FINISH

Round of 32

Uruguay due to the prohibitive costs. It would be another 72 years before the country graced the game's biggest showcase.

Illustration by **Christoph Niemann**

GROUP

E

ICONIC MOMENT No one could have foreseen Germany's 7–1 annihilation of Brazil in the 2014 World Cup semis, going up

FIFA RANKING 10

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 21st • **Last Appearance** 2022 (Group Stage)

Best Finish Champion (1954, 1974, 1990, 2014)

MANAGER

Julian Nagelsmann

GERMANY

A TRADITIONAL POWER TRIES TO REGAIN ITS MOJO

GERMANY HAS reached the semifinals at 12 World Cups, making its repeat group stage exits in 2018 and '22 all the more shocking. But after Manuel Neuer, Toni Kroos, Thomas Müller and İlkay Gündoğan hung up their jerseys for good in 2024, taking 451 caps and 56 years of combined national team experience with them, 2026 marks the beginning of a fresh chapter. There are still vets, mostly on defense, but the attack is spearheaded by 23-year-old Florian Wirtz. Another relative neophyte is Julian Nagelsmann, an analytically minded coach with no World Cup experience. —J.S.

X-FACTOR

JAMAL MUSIALA
Midfielder

The Bayern Munich maestro—who tied for the Golden Boot with three goals at Euro 2024—will pull the strings for Germany in the midfield. He is back to full health from a horrific broken leg and dislocated ankle at last year's Club World Cup.

BREAKOUT STAR

NICK WOLTEMADE
Forward

Largely unknown outside of Germany this time last year, a big-money transfer to Newcastle United thrust him into the Premier League spotlight. International teams yet to experience the rangy attacker's skill set firsthand are in for a surprise.

GROUP E SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/14	MATCH 2 • 6/20	MATCH 3 • 6/25
Houston	Toronto	East Rutherford, N.J.
VS	VS	VS
Curaçao	Côte d'Ivoire	Ecuador

LIKELY FINISH

Round of 16

FROM L-R: EMMANUELE CIANCAGLINI/CIANCAPHOTO STUDIO/GETTY IMAGES; ALEX GRIMM/GETTY IMAGES

5–0 in the first 29 minutes. So beaten were the hosts that German manager Joachim Löw told his team "not to ridicule" Brazil.

Illustration by **Yohey Horishita**

GROUP F

ICONIC MOMENT Japan got a brutal draw in 2022, being matched up with Germany and Spain in Qatar, but the Samurai

FIFA RANKING 18

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 8th • **Last Appearance** 2022 (Round of 16)

Best Finish Round of 16 (2002, 2010, 2018, 2022)

MANAGER

Hajime Moriyasu

JAPAN

INJURIES ARE MAKING THE SAMURAI BLUE

JAPAN MANAGER Hajime Moriyasu has a squad that is known for its high-intensity pressing and endless energy reserves. He's going to need that, because his side has been hit by a handful of serious injuries. Takumi Minamino of AS Monaco will miss the tournament after tearing his ACL, and captain Wataru Endo is also doubtful to make the trip after undergoing ankle surgery. Losing two Champions League–caliber players hurts, but Moriyasu's squad still has the attacking dynamism and invaluable experience required to spring a surprise or two. —E.R.M.

FROM LEFT: HIROKI WATANABE/GETTY IMAGES; TORU HANAI/GETTY IMAGES

X-FACTOR

TAKEFUSA KUBO
Forward

Known as the Japanese Messi in his homeland due to his superb technical ability, Real Sociedad's 5'7" forward will bamboozle defenders with his searing speed and supreme agility. He racked up four goals and eight assists in qualifying.

BREAKOUT STAR

ZION SUZUKI
Goalkeeper

Having already dazzled in Italy with Parma, the athletic 23-year-old keeper, who was born in Newark, can now thrust himself into the crosshairs of big clubs (he's been linked with AC Milan) by taking his status from regional to global star.

GROUP F SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/14	MATCH 2 • 6/20	MATCH 3 • 6/25
Arlington, Texas	Guadalupe, Mexico	Arlington, Texas
VS	VS	VS
Netherlands	Tunisia	Sweden

LIKELY FINISH

Round of 32

Blue beat both former world champions—with help from a pair of equalizers from sub Ritsu Dōan—to win that Group of Death.

Illustration by **Mr. Nelson Design**

GROUP F

ICONIC MOMENT No one saw it coming, certainly not Sweden's Jan Olsson. Johan Cruyff looked ready to pass, but instead

FIFA RANKING 7

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 12th • **Last Appearance** 2022 (Quarterfinals)

Best Finish Runner-up (1974, 1978, 2010)

MANAGER

Ronald Koeman

NETHERLANDS

THE FLYING DUTCHMEN WON'T BE FLYING HIGH

NO COUNTRY has appeared in more World Cup finals without having lifted the trophy than the nation that gave the world Total Football. Don't expect the Dutch to get far enough for a fourth attempt. Ronald Koeman's side should be aesthetically pleasing in attack, aiming to dominate possession against inferior opposition and taking a more direct approach versus stronger outfits. But this is a team that—despite the inclusion of the likes of Virgil van Dijk, Frenkie de Jong and Memphis Depay—lacks the same wow factor of years gone by. —J.S.

X-FACTOR

MEMPHIS DEPAY
Forward

Eight qualifying goals from the headband aficionado made him the Netherlands' all-time leading scorer, with 55. Now 32, the Corinthians forward has been less prolific at the club level of late but continues to pack a punch when wearing orange.

BREAKOUT STAR

MICKY VAN DE VEN
Defender

After having served as a reserve at Euro 2024, the Tottenham Hotspur defender will move into the starting XI. His speed (he holds the Premier League record for fastest sprint, at 23.23 mph) will be on display in his marauding runs from the back.

GROUP F SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/14	MATCH 2 • 6/20	MATCH 3 • 6/25
Arlington, Texas	Houston	Kansas City, Mo.
VS Japan	VS Sweden	VS Tunisia

LIKELY FINISH

Round of 32

dragged the ball behind his standing leg, turned and was away. It was 1974, and the world had witnessed the first Cruyff Turn.

LEFT PAGE: JUSTIN SETTERFIELD/GETTY IMAGES; JOHN MACDOUGALL/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; STF/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; INA FASSBENDER/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; BORIS STREUBEL/UEFA/GETTY IMAGES; MONIRUL BHUIYAN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; ROY LAZET/SOCCRATES/GETTY IMAGES; ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES; BONGARTS/GETTY IMAGES; DEAN MOUHTAROPOULOS/GETTY IMAGES. RIGHT PAGE, FROM LEFT: GRZEGORZ WAJDA/SOPA IMAGES/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY IMAGES; ROY LAZET/SOCCRATES/GETTY IMAGES

Illustration by **Sander Berg**

GROUP F

ICONIC MOMENT Unheralded Sweden sparkled the last time the World Cup was held in the U.S., thanks to dashing midfielder

FIFA RANKING 38

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 13th • **Last Appearance** 2018 (Quarterfinals)

Best Finish Runner-up (1958)

MANAGER

Graham Potter

SWEDEN

NEW TACTICS HAVE LED TO NEW OPTIMISM

SWEDEN HEADS to the 2026 World Cup without having won a single match during qualifying. Yes, you read that correctly. But Graham Potter's team snuck into the playoffs by topping its group in the third tier of the UEFA Nations League, and subsequent victories over Ukraine and Poland sent the Swedes to North America. The playoff success came after Potter switched to a back three, having his team soak up pressure and counterattack. Qualifying was a disaster, but Sweden is now roused and ready to capitalize on its gathering momentum. —J.C.

X-FACTOR

VIKTOR GYÖKERES
Forward

Goals have been hard to come by for the $87 million Arsenal striker this season, but the combative frontman is a real handful for defenders. He secured Sweden's place in the field with four goals in its two March playoff matches.

BREAKOUT STAR

YASIN AYARI
Midfielder

The understated 22-year-old Brighton & Hove Albion midfielder has become a metronomic presence on England's south coast. His brilliance in possession is subtle, but make no mistake: He's a difference-maker.

GROUP F SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/14	MATCH 2 • 6/20	MATCH 3 • 6/25
Guadalupe, Mexico	Houston	Arlington, Texas
VS Tunisia	VS Netherlands	VS Japan

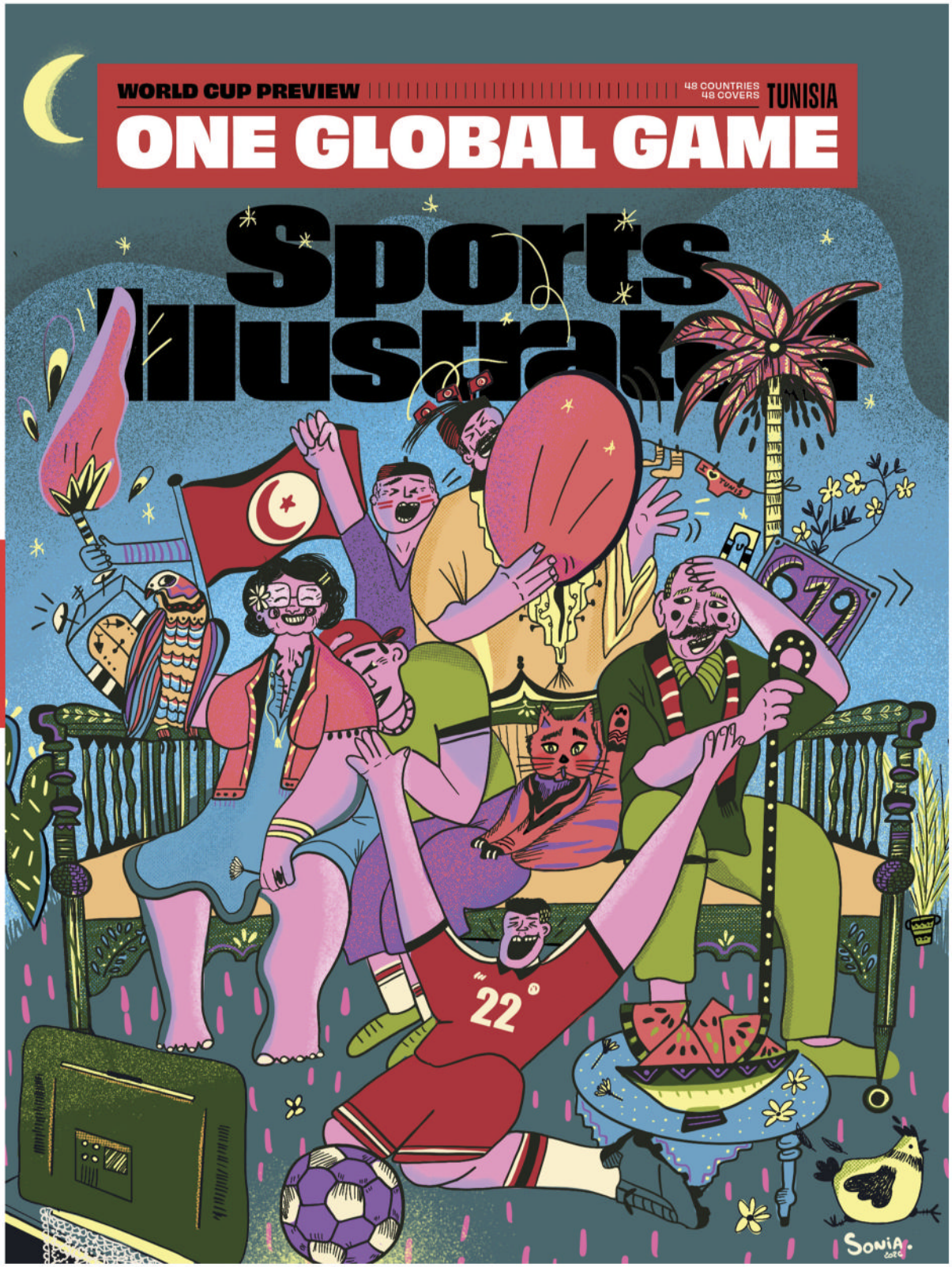
LIKELY FINISH

Round of 32

FROM L-LEFT: ROBBIE JAY BARRATT/AMA/GETTY IMAGES; MATEUSZ SLODKOWSKI/GETTY IMAGES

Tomas Brolin, whose quarterfinal strike in a penalty-shootout victory over Romania remains firmly rooted in Swedish folklore.

Illustration by **Sonia Ben Salem**



GROUP

ICONIC MOMENT In 1978, Tunisia defeated Mexico 3–1 in Argentina, a shocking come-from-behind result that marked

FIFA RANKING 44

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 7th • **Last Appearance** 2022 (Group Stage)

Best Finish Group Stage (1978, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2018, 2022)

MANAGER

Sabri Lamouchi

TUNISIA

THE EAGLES OF CARTHAGE HAVE LANDED—AGAIN

WHICH TUNISIA will show up? The squad that went out in the round of 16 at the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations campaign after conceding six goals in four games, or the one that didn't allow a goal in 10 World Cup qualifiers? The Eagles of Carthage need it to be the latter to have any chance of advancing to the knockout stage, something they've never done in six previous appearances. The defense will need to be stout, because this team is not exactly an offensive juggernaut; four of Tunisia's nine wins during qualifying were decided in the last 10 minutes. —J.S.

X-FACTOR

ELIAS ACHOURI
Forward

The tricky winger's first two-plus years with FC Copenhagen have yielded 12 goals and 25 assists, and Tunisia is hoping for similar productivity from the 27-year-old. Fast, powerful and comfortable with both feet, this will be his first taste of a World Cup.

BREAKOUT STAR

ISMAËL GHARBI
Midfielder

Technically proficient on the ball and an excellent passer, this graduate of Paris Saint-Germain's academy also has a point to prove to his current employers. SC Braga loaned the 22-year-old out to FC Augsburg of the Bundesliga last September.

GROUP F SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/14	MATCH 2 • 6/20	MATCH 3 • 6/25
Guadalupe, Mexico	Guadalupe, Mexico	Kansas City, Mo.
VS Sweden	VS Japan	VS Netherlands

LIKELY FINISH

Group Stage

FROM LEFT: SEBASTIEN BOZON/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; PAUL ELLIS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

the first-ever win in a World Cup match by an African country, 44 long years after Egypt earned the continent's first berth.

Illustration by **KAAN Illustration**

GROUP G

ICONIC MOMENT The Red Devils seemed destined for a premature exit in 2018, falling behind 2–0 to Japan in the round

FIFA RANKING 9

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 15th • **Last Appearance** 2022 (Group Stage)

Best Finish Third Place (2018)

MANAGER

Rudi Garcia

BELGIUM

THE RED DEVILS WANT TO ATONE FOR 2022

BELGIUM'S NEED to evolve became clear four years ago when Roberto Martínez's team showed its age by wilting in the Qatari heat. The Red Devils succumbed to an embarrassing group stage exit, scoring just one goal, against Canada. Remnants of the good old days are still within the framework for first-time World Cup manager Rudi Garcia. His roster has a balanced (and deep) midfield and proficient players out wide, but his defense is young and green. The draw has worked in its favor, but Belgium nonetheless enters the tournament as an outsider. —J.C.

X-FACTOR

JÉRÉMY DOKU
Forward

Belgium's new main man is a game-breaker from Man City who—even without scoring—tormented the U.S. in a March friendly by both isolating himself in transition and distracting the defense to set up scoring plays for his teammates.

BREAKOUT STAR

MALICK FOFANA
Forward

As dangerously unpredictable as Doku is, the 21-year-old Lyon playmaker is just as good at taking on his man. An ankle injury last October sidelined Fofana for six months, but that has done nothing to keep European powerhouses from circling.

GROUP G SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/15	MATCH 2 • 6/21	MATCH 3 • 6/26
Seattle	Inglewood, Calif.	Vancouver
VS Egypt	VS Iran	VS New Zealand

LIKELY FINISH

Quarterfinals

FROM L-R: GRZEGORZ WAJDA/SOPA IMAGES/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY IMAGES; HARRY LANGER/DEFODI IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

of 16. However, a stunning comeback was capped off by a 94th-minute Nacer Chadli winner from an electrifying counterattack.

Illustration by **Amira Tanany**

GROUP

ICONIC MOMENT A rare moment of ecstasy arrived in 1990, when Egypt opened its campaign with a surprise tie against

FIFA RANKING 29

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 4th • **Last Appearance** 2018 (Group Stage)

Best Finish Group Stage (1934, 1990, 2018)

MANAGER

Hossam Hassan

EGYPT

A WIN WOULD BE DIVINE FOR THE PHARAOHS

DESPITE WINNING the Africa Cup of Nations a record seven times, Egypt is still working toward its first World Cup win. Manager Hossam Hassan, who adapts his tactics to his opponents, has the unenviable task of rewriting history with a squad lacking depth and much genuine talent outside of a pair of star performers: Liverpool legend Mohamed Salah and Manchester City forward Omar Marmoush. There is hope, though: The Pharaohs were unbeaten across 10 qualifying matches, conceding just two goals in that stretch. —E.R.M.

X-FACTOR

MOHAMED SALAH
Forward

The global superstar has been his nation's driving force for much of his 15-year international career. At 33, the once-speedy goal machine has slowed down, but he showed he can still take over by scoring nine of Egypt's 20 goals during qualifying.

BREAKOUT STAR

IBRAHIM ADEL
Midfielder

One of the few fresh faces on a roster that's in dire of need of them, the 25-year-old is also one of the few Pharaohs to ply his trade outside of Egypt (on loan at FC Nordsjælland in Denmark). Adel can play several attacking positions.

GROUP G SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/15 Seattle	MATCH 2 • 6/21 Vancouver	MATCH 3 • 6/26 Seattle
VS Belgium	VS New Zealand	VS Iran

LIKELY FINISH

Round of 32

ULRIK PEDERSEN/NURPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES (2)

the Netherlands, the reigning European champs. Magdi Abdelghani's PK secured Egypt's first World Cup point, defying the odds.

Illustration by **Rashin Kheiriyeh**

GROUP G

ICONIC MOMENT In a 1998 match against the U.S. described as the "most politically charged game in World Cup history,"

FIFA RANKING 21

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 7th · **Last Appearance** 2022 (Group Stage)

Best Finish Group Stage (1978, 1998, 2006, 2014, 2018, 2022)

MANAGER

Amir Ghalenoei

IRAN

A KNOCKOUT GAME IS FINALLY WITHIN REACH

IRAN IS due to compete at a fourth consecutive World Cup after making light work of a less daunting qualification process. The tournament's larger field means Amir Ghalenoei's side would have as good a chance as ever to reach the knockout stage, having suffered six group stage eliminations, with a resillient squad that is tough to beat in tight contests. With the U.S.-Iranian conflict casting a large shadow, one can expect the atmosphere to be uncomfortable as FIFA rejected Iran's request to move its matches out of the U.S. in a mightily competitive Group G. —J.C.

GROUP G SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 · 6/15	MATCH 2 · 6/21	MATCH 3 · 6/26
Inglewood, Calif.	Inglewood, Calif.	Seattle
VS	VS	VS
New Zealand	Belgium	Egypt

X-FACTOR

MEHDI TAREMI
Forward

An inexperienced Iranian squad will lean on its veterans, with the 33-year-old Olympiacos striker still the man the team will rely on in the final third. He is a serious scoring threat, having notched 10 goals and eight assists during qualifying.

BREAKOUT STAR

AMIRMOHAMMAD RAZZAGHINIA
Midfielder

Still new to the senior setup, the 20-year-old defensive midfielder built up minutes for Iranian club Esteghlal this season. He earned his second cap with a start in a March friendly against Costa Rica and should see more time in the World Cup.

LIKELY FINISH

Round of 32

Iran, 19 years post-revolution, claimed its first tournament win. Players returned home as heroes despite failing to advance.

FROM LEFT: NOUSHAD THEKKAYIL/NURPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES; ATTA KENARE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Illustration by **Nigel Buchanan**

GROUP

G

FUN FACT New Zealand was the only team to finish the 2010 World Cup undefeated—even champion Spain lost a match in

FIFA RANKING 85

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 3rd • **Last Appearance** 2010 (Group Stage)

Best Finish Group Stage (1982, 2010)

MANAGER

Darren Bazeley

NEW ZEALAND

THIS CROP OF KIWIS ISN'T RIPE FOR MUCH

THE WORLD CUP'S expansion to 48 teams was a particularly big deal for New Zealand because it gave the Oceania Football Confederation its own automatic qualification berth. Three times before, the Kiwis had won their continental section, only to fall in the interconfederation playoffs. This time, exclusively facing Pacific island nations ranked outside the world's top 150, New Zealand scored 29 goals and conceded once to punch a ticket to the finals. The Kiwis are likely to struggle, but ultimately they have nothing to lose as the lowest-ranked team in the field. —J.S.

FROM LEFT: SEBASTIAN FREJ/GETTY IMAGES; DARRIAN TRAYNOR/GETTY IMAGES

X-FACTOR

CHRIS WOOD
Forward

The 34-year-old striker finished OFC qualifying with nine goals. He is the country's all-time leading scorer (45 goals) and is a game away from becoming its most capped player, but could be slowed by a knee injury that sidelined him for six months.

BREAKOUT STAR

FINN SURMAN
Defender

A tall (6'3") and imposing center back, Surman—who was born in Wales—was awarded Best Young Player at the 2024 OFC Nations Cup. The 22-year-old joined the Portland Timbers from Wellington Phoenix and is competing in his third MLS season.

GROUP G SCHEDULE

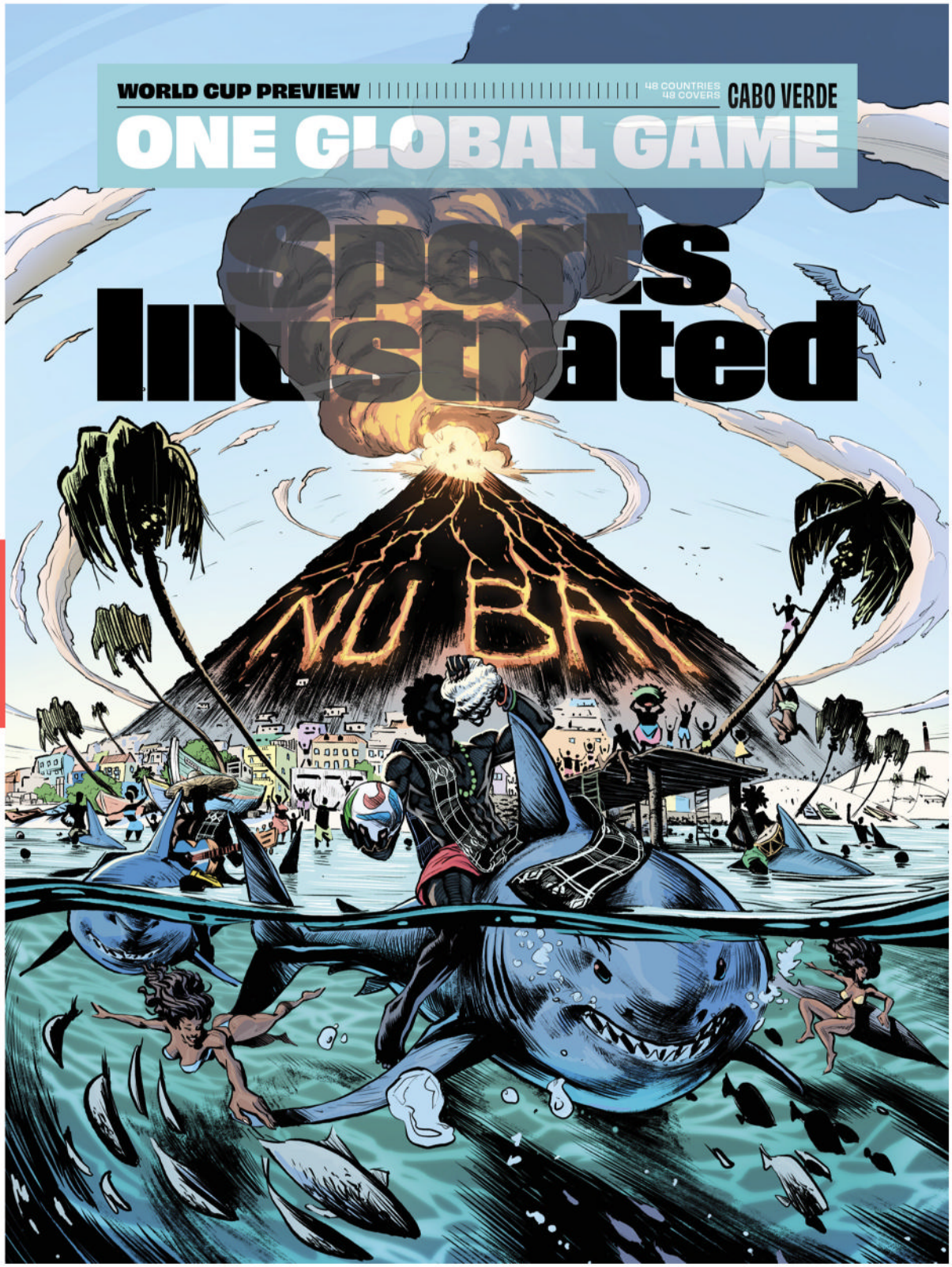
MATCH 1 • 6/15	MATCH 2 • 6/21	MATCH 3 • 6/26
Inglewood, Calif.	Vancouver	Vancouver
VS Iran	VS Egypt	VS Belgium

LIKELY FINISH

Group Stage

the group stage. But no wins and three draws in the opening round wasn't enough to save the All-Whites from early elimination.

Illustration by **Aires Melo**



GROUP H

FUN FACT The Cabo Verdean Football Federation used all means to build its squad, turning to LinkedIn to recruit Dublin-born

FIFA RANKING 69

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 1st (tournament debut)

Top International Result Quarterfinals, 2023 AFCON

MANAGER Bubista

CABO VERDE

THE BLUE SHARKS ARE CHOMPING AT THEIR FIRST BID

THE NARRATIVE of Cabo Verde's rise to its first World Cup seems like a familiar trope: Plucky upstart pulls off miraculous achievement. But the 10-island archipelago is a proud soccer nation and didn't stumble here by accident. This story is defined by proactive recruitment and remarkable resilience. The Blue Sharks beat out African giant Cameroon in its qualifying group thanks to its efficient counterattack. Two former world champs await Bubista's first-timers as they aim to repeat the successful debut campaigns of Nigeria (1994) and Senegal (2002). —J.C.

FROM LEFT: VISIONHAUS/GETTY IMAGES; MICHAEL BRADLEY/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

X-FACTOR

RYAN MENDES
Forward

The Cabo Verde captain is one of few on the roster with experience in Europe's premier divisions. The former Lille and Nottingham Forest star—currently playing in Türkiye—is his country's all-time leading scorer, with 22 goals in 96 games.

BREAKOUT STAR

SIDNY LOPES CABRAL
Defender

Born in the Netherlands, the 23-year-old bounced around the youth and lower leagues of Sweden, Germany and Portugal before landing at Benfica. The two-footed fullback had one goal and one assist in two qualifying games for the Blue Sharks.

GROUP H SCHEDULE

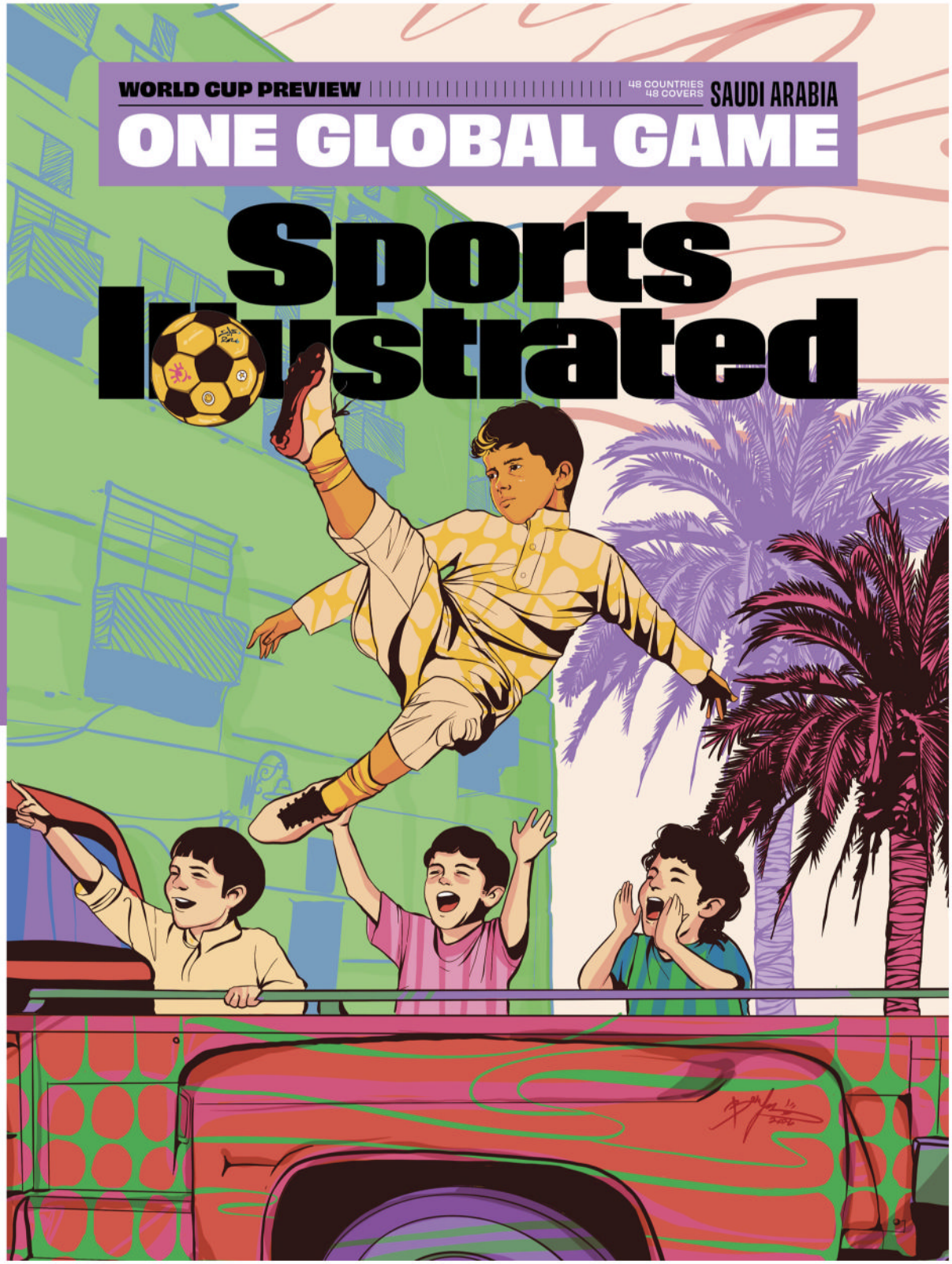
MATCH 1 • 6/15	MATCH 2 • 6/21	MATCH 3 • 6/26
Atlanta	Miami Gardens, Fla.	Houston
VS Spain	VS Uruguay	VS Saudi Arabia

LIKELY FINISH

Group Stage

defender Roberto Lopes in 2019. The 33-year-old has since racked up more than 40 caps representing his father's country.

Illustration by **Bayan Yasien**



GROUP

ICONIC MOMENT Yes, the Argentina win in 2022 was incredible. But Saeed Al-Owairan's solo effort against Belgium in

FIFA RANKING

61

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 7th • **Last Appearance** 2022 (Group Stage)

Best Finish Round of 16 (1994)

MANAGER

TBD

SAUDI ARABIA

THE GREEN FALCONS CRAVE ANOTHER UPSET

SAUDI ARABIA'S domestic league has grown rapidly in recent years, but that investment has yet to fully translate to the national team. The Green Falcons required four rounds of qualifying, an inconsistent campaign in which they noticeably struggled against stronger sides. That may have been a factor in the decision to fire manager Hervé Renard just 59 days before the tournament's start, but the change is unlikely to alter much tactically. Soaking up possession before springing forward to attack is the only way to grind out positive results against Spain and Uruguay. —B.L.

FROM LEFT: YASSER BAKHSH/GETTY IMAGES; ABDEL GHANI BASHIR/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

X-FACTOR

SALEM AL-DAWSARI
Forward

The scorer of two of Saudi Arabia's three goals at the 2022 World Cup, including the winner against eventual champion Argentina, the captain will lead the attack again in '26. He's been in peak form domestically in recent years at Al Hilal.

BREAKOUT STAR

MARWAN AL-SAHAFI
Forward

One of the few Saudi players to venture into Europe, the 22-year-old has established himself on loan from Al-Ittihad at Belgian clubs Beerschot (where he had six goals last season) and Antwerp. At 5' 9", he is quick and deceptively strong.

GROUP H SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/15	MATCH 2 • 6/21	MATCH 3 • 6/26
Miami Gardens, Fla.	Atlanta	Houston
VS	*VS*	*VS*
Uruguay	***Spain***	***Cabo Verde***

LIKELY FINISH

Group Stage

1994? Iconic. Al-Owairan sprinted almost the full pitch, slaloming past five players to score an all-time great World Cup goal.

Illustration by **Lisett Ledón**

GROUP

ICONIC MOMENT A brutal 2010 World Cup final, featuring 14 yellow cards and a red card for the Netherlands' John Heitinga,

FIFA RANKING

2

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 17th • **Last Appearance** 2022 (Round of 16)

Best Finish Champion (2010)

MANAGER

Luis de la Fuente

SPAIN

EUROPE'S BEST AIMS FOR WORLD DOMINATION

SPAIN HEADS into this World Cup with lofty expectations, widely regarded as the most talented side from Europe. La Roja is able to exert all-out control over matches like few international outfits can but are not exclusively passers. This is also a direct and speedy side that operates in unison so harmoniously, with the extra sprinkle of magic supplied by perhaps the best player in the world, Lamine Yamal. With Spain having re-emerged as an unstoppable force at Euro 2024, Luis de la Fuente's squad is going to be hard to beat this summer. —J.C.

X-FACTOR

LAMINE YAMAL
Forward

As the team's youngest-ever goalscorer, the 18-year-old is capable of producing a World Cup campaign like 1986 Diego Maradona, 2018 Kylian Mbappé or 2022 Lionel Messi. La Roja will lean heavily on Yamal for ingenuity out wide.

BREAKOUT STAR

FERMÍN LÓPEZ
Midfielder

He may well have played in more than 100 games for Barcelona, but the 23-year-old is still finding his way with the national team. Regardless, this midfielder has it all: exquisite passing, deft dribbling and clinical finishing (with both feet).

GROUP H SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/15	MATCH 2 • 6/21	MATCH 3 • 6/26
Atlanta	Atlanta	Zapopan, Mexico
VS	*VS*	*VS*
Cabo Verde	***Saudi Arabia***	***Uruguay***

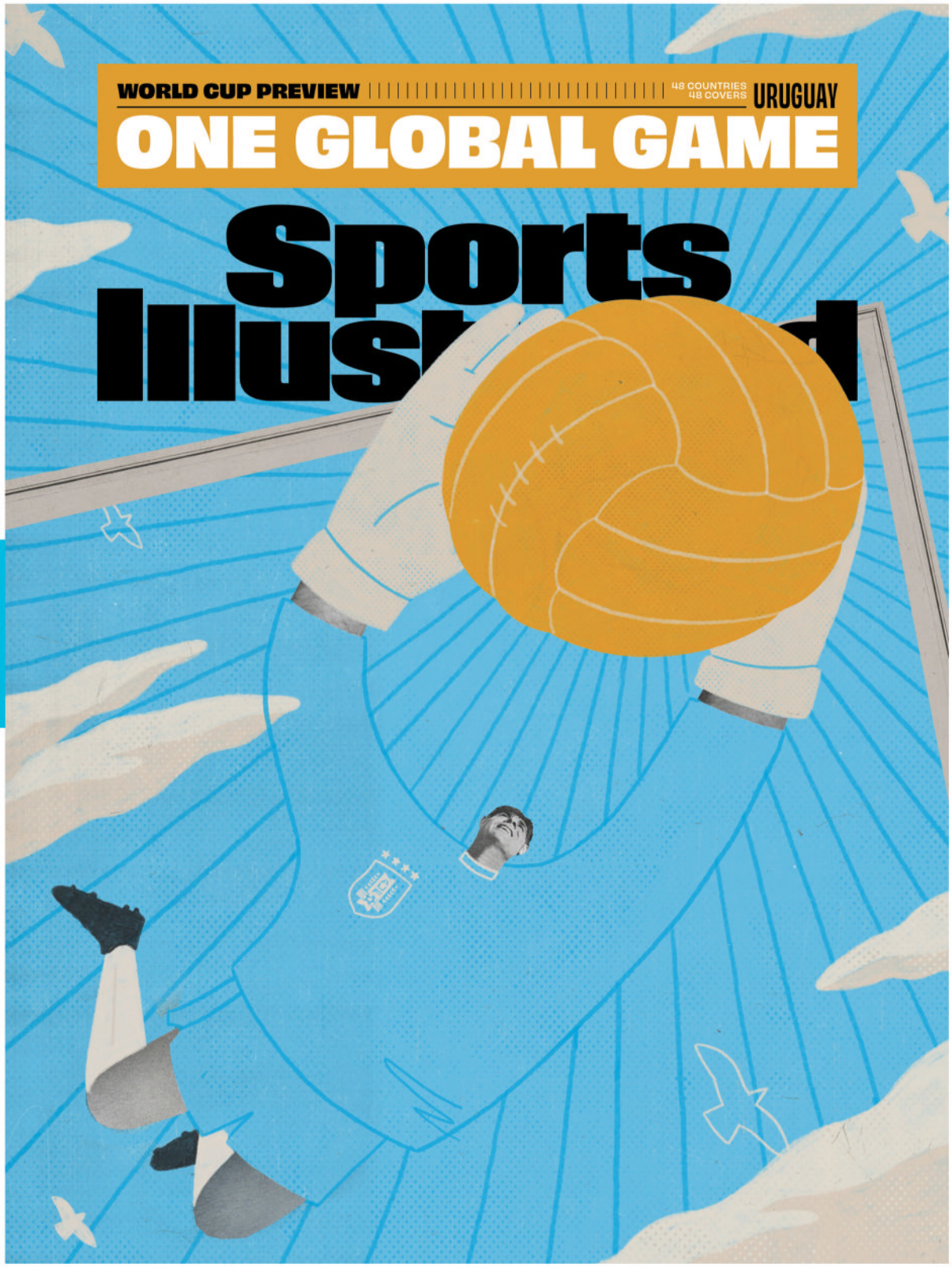
LIKELY FINISH

Semifinals

was decided by the swing of Andrés Iniesta's right boot in the 116th minute—at last sending Spain to soccer's summit.

LEFT PAGE: MAGARA PRESS SL/ALAMY LIVE NEWS; RIGHT PAGE, FROM LEFT: STEFAN MATZKE/SAMPICS/GETTY IMAGES; ALEX CAPARROS/GETTY IMAGES

Illustration by **Gabriela Sánchez**



GROUP

H

ICONIC MOMENT Luis Suárez threw out the rulebook when he swatted away Dominic Adiyiah's header with two hands in

FIFA RANKING 17

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 15th • **Last Appearance** 2022 (Group Stage)

Best Finish Champion (1930, 1950)

MANAGER

Marcelo Bielsa

URUGUAY

LA CELESTE WON'T ADD A STAR TO THE CREST

URUGUAY HAS the unenviable task of navigating a new era without Luis Suárez and Edinson Cavani, the top two goalscorers in the nation's history. Now Marcelo Bielsa must rely on a squad of largely unproven players who have had trouble finding the net of late. La Celeste scored just twice through four friendlies in a stretch from November to March. After impressive wins against Brazil and Argentina during qualifying, the team imploded, dropping points in nine of its last 12 games to finish fourth in the CONMEBOL standings. —A.L

X-FACTOR

FEDERICO VALVERDE
Midfielder

The Real Madrid midfielder—who had a Champions League hat trick against Man City in March—provides the fuel for Uruguay's engine. His defensive prowess, creativity and powerful shot also give him the tool kit to play nearly any position on the pitch.

BREAKOUT STAR

BRIAN RODRÍGUEZ
Midfielder

Despite taking until his mid-20s to fully ignite, the former LA FC contributor has developed into an electrifying attacker at Club América in Liga MX. Nicknamed Rayito (for Little Lightning) the 5'10" winger can provide the spark for Uruguay's attack.

GROUP H SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/15	MATCH 2 • 6/21	MATCH 3 • 6/26
Miami Gardens, Fla.	Miami Gardens, Fla.	Zapopan, Mexico
VS	VS	VS
Saudi Arabia	Cabo Verde	Spain

LIKELY FINISH

Round of 32

LEFT PAGE: GEORGE GRANTHAM BAIN COLLECTION/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS; RIGHT PAGE, FROM LEFT: GUILLERMO LEGARIA/GETTY IMAGES; HOWARD SMITH/SI PHOTOS/USSF/GETTY IMAGES

the 120th minute of Uruguay's win over Ghana in the 2010 quarterfinals, which he cheekily called the "save of the tournament."

Illustration by **Renaud Vigourt**

GROUP

ICONIC MOMENT Arguably the most infamous incident in World Cup history belongs to Les Bleus, whether they like it or not. The

FIFA RANKING

1

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 17th • **Last Appearance** 2022 (Runner-up)

Best Finish Champion (1998, 2018)

MANAGER

Didier Deschamps

FRANCE

EXPECTATIONS ARE SKY-HIGH FOR LES BLEUS

FRANCE HEADS into every major tournament as a top contender. The two-time world champions boast the deepest roster in international soccer with Kylian Mbappé and 2025 Ballon d'Or winner Ousmane Dembélé leading the charge. Manager Didier Deschamps, who has won the World Cup as both a player and coach, will step aside after this summer. He is a divisive figure, but few can argue with his record since taking over in 2012, guiding Les Bleus to back-to-back World Cup finals: a victory in 2018 and heartbreak against Argentina in 2022. —E.R.M.

X-FACTOR

KYLIAN MBAPPÉ
Forward

Since scoring a hat trick in the 2018 World Cup final, he's been France's poster boy, leading Les Bleus in goals and assists during qualifying. The 27-year-old Real Madrid striker balances balletic movements with pure power.

BREAKOUT STAR

MANU KONÉ
Midfielder

This all-action midfielder has boosted his reputation with an impressive stint for Roma that has made him a hot transfer target. The 25-year-old missed France's March friendlies with a hamstring injury, but is expected to be healthy for the Cup.

GROUP I SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/16	MATCH 2 • 6/22	MATCH 3 • 6/26
East Rutherford, N.J.	Philadelphia	Foxborough, Mass.
VS	VS	VS
Senegal	Iraq	Norway

LIKELY FINISH

Champion

FROM LEFT: ANP/GETTY IMAGES; IBRAHIM EZZAT/NURPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES

sight of Zinedine Zidane launching his head at the chest of Italy's Marco Materazzi during the 2006 final continues to haunt.

Illustration by **Ahmed Herokai**

GROUP

FUN FACT Iraq's World Cup history is uniquely tied to Mexico. The team's previous appearance in the tournament came in

FIFA RANKING 57

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 2nd • **Last Appearance** 1986 (Group Stage)

Best Finish Group Stage (1986)

MANAGER

Graham Arnold

IRAQ

A LONG-AWAITED RETURN IS MET WITH A BIG TEST

TO QUALIFY for the World Cup for the first time in 40 years, the Lions of Mesopotamia traveled a long and complicated path, but they eventually secured their spot with a 2–1 win over Bolivia in the interconfederation playoffs. Iraq does not have the firepower to control games in possession or dominate in the final third. Instead, Graham Arnold's side relies on disciplined defense to keep games close, something it must double down on given the attacking threats of Norway, France and Senegal. There is little room for error in this group. —A.L.

X-FACTOR

MOHANAD ALI
Forward

The 25-year-old striker is one of the team's most consistent players. He has earned super-sub status with six goals in his last 12 caps despite not being a regular starter. His talents will be wasted if he only comes in off the bench this summer.

BREAKOUT STAR

ALI AL-HAMADI
Forward

One of the few Iraqi players with experience playing in England, the 24-year-old has shown he can step up in big moments: He scored the opening goal in his team's playoff win over Bolivia. That moment likely secured his starting spot.

GROUP I SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/16	MATCH 2 • 6/22	MATCH 3 • 6/26
Foxborough, Mass.	Philadelphia	Toronto
VS **Norway**	*VS* **France**	*VS* **Senegal**

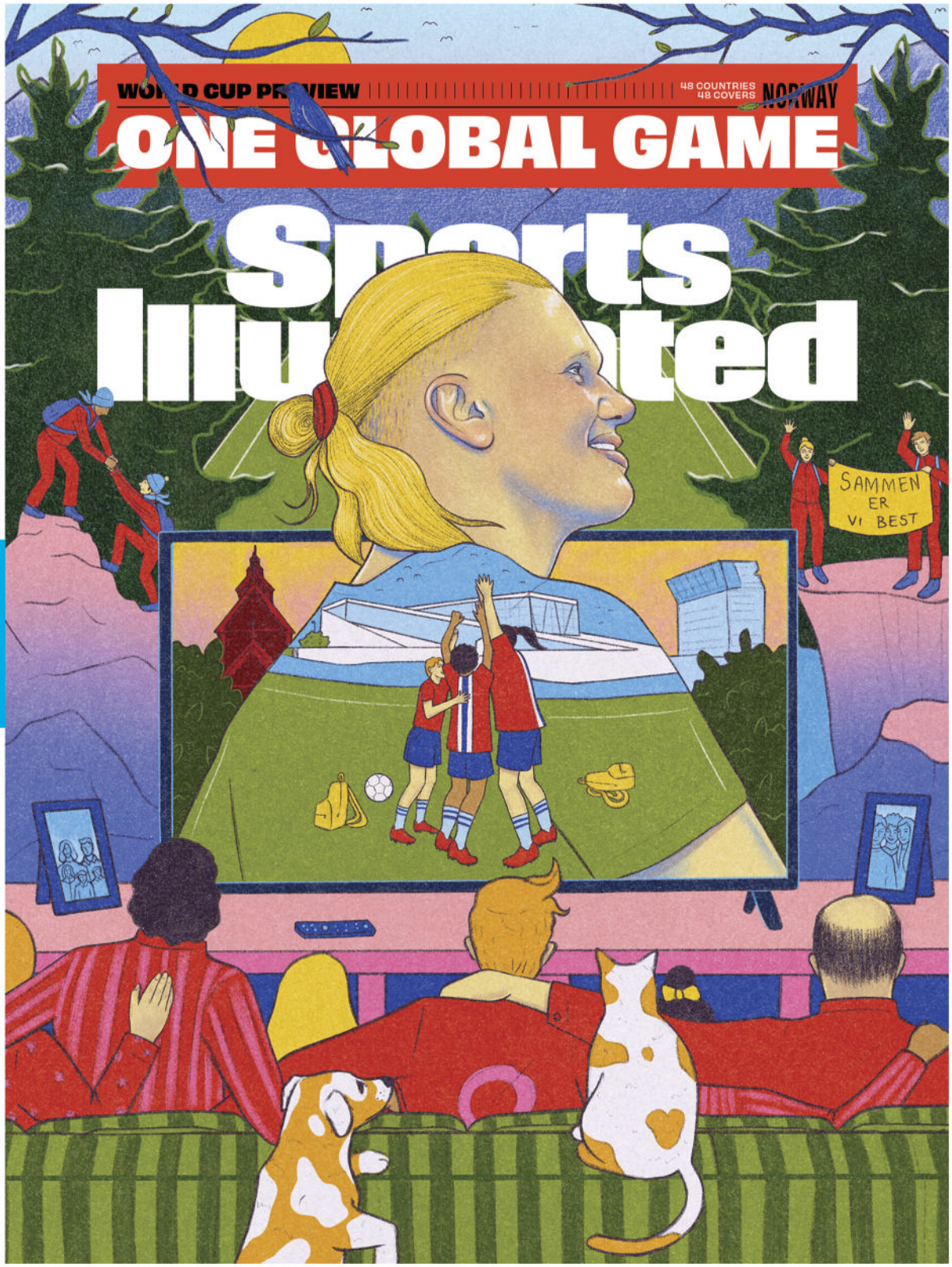
LIKELY FINISH

Group Stage

El Tri's backyard in 1986. This current squad qualified for the 2026 edition, cohosted by Mexico, with a playoff win in Monterrey.

FROM: CEERWAN AZIZ/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK; JULIO CESAR AGUILAR/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Illustration by **Natalie Foss**



GROUP

ICONIC MOMENT Midfielder Kjetil Rekdal became a Norwegian hero in 1998, converting a last-minute penalty—and beating

FIFA RANKING 31

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 4th • **Last Appearance** 1998 (Round of 16)

Best Finish Round of 16 (1998)

MANAGER

Ståle Solbakken

NORWAY

HAVING THE BEST SCORER IN THE WORLD HELPS

NORWAY RETURNS to the World Cup after a lengthy 28-year absence. Ståle Solbakken's young squad stormed through qualifying with a perfect record—twice thrashing Italy and scoring at an alarming rate with 37 goals, just under half coming from Erling Haaland. But this side is far from a one-man band: Martin Ødegaard pulls the strings in the midfield, Antonio Nusa terrorizes defenses on the wing and Julian Ryerson anchors the back line. Solbakken has transformed the perennial underachievers into a legitimate threat. —B.L.

X-FACTOR

ERLING HAALAND
Forward

The ponytailed Manchester City frontman is a goalscoring machine. Already Norway's all-time leading scorer at just 25, his 16 goals in World Cup qualifying were twice as many as any other player in Europe—a potential warning for the summer.

BREAKOUT STAR

ANTONIO NUSA
Forward

A two-footed winger comfortable on either side, he has earned the nickname Norwegian Neymar. The young RB Leipzig star tormented Italy during qualifying with a perfect setup on the Lions' first goal and a controlled finish on their second in the 3–0 win.

GROUP I SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/16	MATCH 2 • 6/22	MATCH 3 • 6/26
Foxborough, Mass.	East Rutherford, N.J.	Foxborough, Mass.
VS	VS	VS
Iraq	*Senegal*	*France*

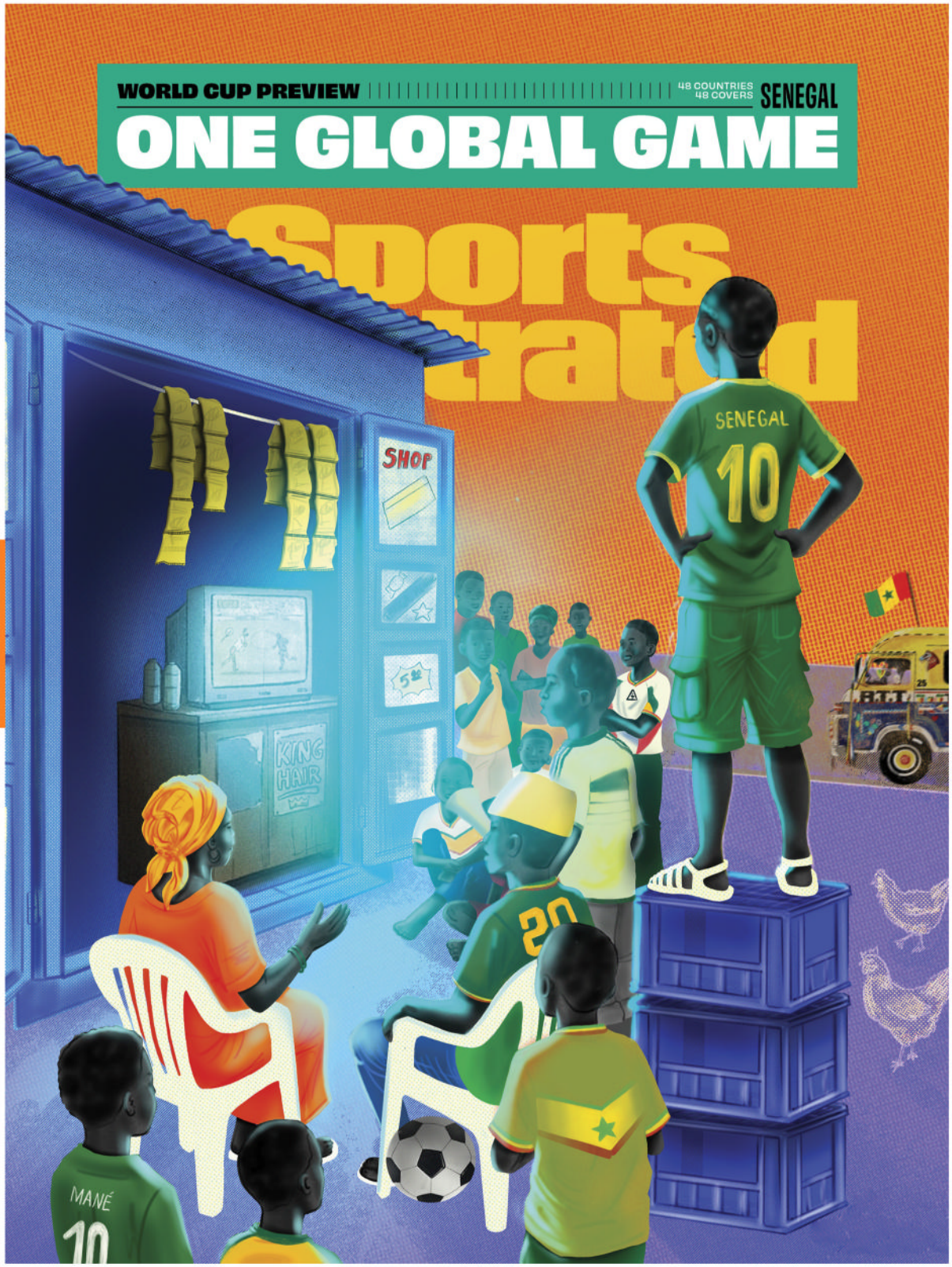
LIKELY FINISH

Round of 16

FROM L-LEFT: DOMENICO CIPPITELLI/NURPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES; MARCO IACOBUCCI/SOPA IMAGES/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY IMAGES

spot-kick specialist Taffarel—to secure a historic 2–1 win over reigning champion Brazil in the final group stage game.

Illustration by **Audrey d'Erneville**



GROUP

ICONIC MOMENT Few moments in tournament history have ever warranted a player taking his jersey off and dancing by

FIFA RANKING 14

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 4th • **Last Appearance** 2022 (Round of 16)

Best Finish Quarterfinals (2002)

MANAGER

Pape Thiaw

SENEGAL

THIS TEAM IS ON THE HUNT FOR AFCON REVENGE

FRESH OFF its 2025 Africa Cup of Nations title being overturned and given to Morocco, Senegal arrives at the World Cup with a point to prove. The Lions of Teranga boast arguably the most complete and well-balanced squad in their history, blending the poise of seasoned vets, such as all-time leading scorer Sadio Mané, with newcomers sprinkled into the midfield and back line. They will open their campaign against France—just as they did in 2002, when they stunned the then-defending champions to springboard a historic run through to the quarterfinals. —B.L.

X-FACTOR

KALIDOU KOULIBALY
Defender

If Senegal is to make it past France and Norway in this group, it will need to contain two potent strikers in Kylian Mbappé and Erling Haaland—a responsibility that will largely fall on its captain. Fortunately, Koulibaly is a show-stopping, colossal presence.

BREAKOUT STAR

EL HADJI MALICK DIOUF
Defender

West Ham United fans already know how good their Senegalese left back is, with his bending, pinpoint accurate crosses into the penalty area. Senegal didn't concede a goal during AFCON when the 21-year-old was on the pitch.

GROUP I SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/16	MATCH 2 • 6/22	MATCH 3 • 6/26
East Rutherford, N.J.	East Rutherford, N.J.	Toronto
VS France	VS Norway	VS Iraq

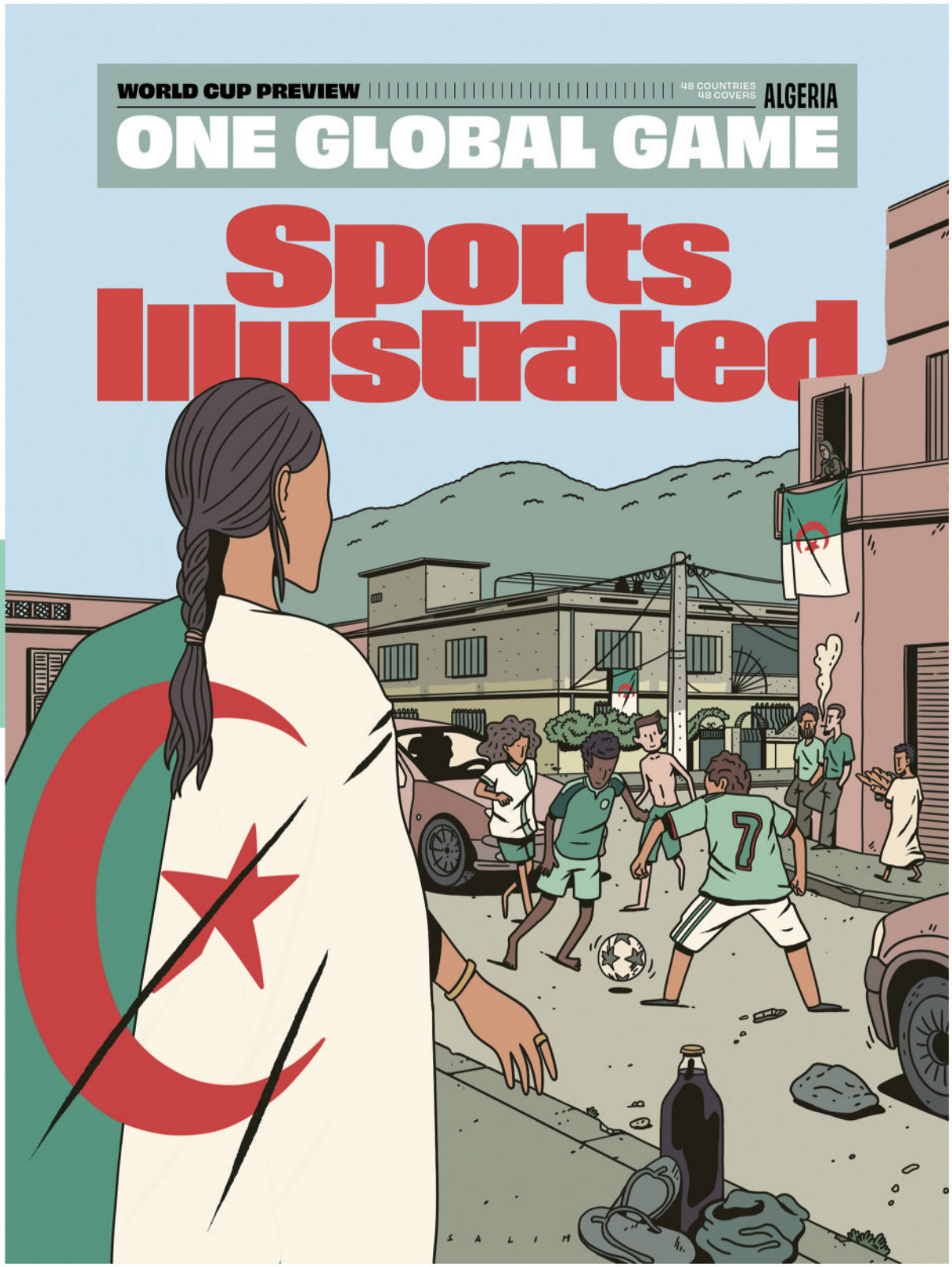
LIKELY FINISH

Round of 32

FROM LEFT: NICK POTTS/PA IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; JOHN WALTON/PA IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

the corner flag quite like Papa Bouba Diop's game-winning goal against France in 2002, Senegal's debut World Cup match.

Illustration by **Salim Zerrouki**



GROUP J

ICONIC MOMENT West German goalkeeper Toni Schumacher predicted his team would score four to eight goals in its

FIFA RANKING 28

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 5th • **Last Appearance** 2014 (Round of 16)

Best Finish Round of 16 (2014)

MANAGER

Vladimir Petković

ALGERIA

THESE DESERT FOXES COULD SLYLY SURPRISE

ALGERIA WILL be making its first World Cup appearance since 2014, when Vahid Halilhodžić's squad pushed the eventual winner, Germany, to the brink in the round of 16. A decade later, the Desert Foxes turned to another Bosnian coach, Vladimir Petković, who took Switzerland to the round of 16 in 2018. Algeria's easy 8-1-1 qualifying run should boost its confidence. But to fully rebound from its back-to-back AFCON group stage exits in 2022 and '24, this team will need its combination of experienced players and emerging talent to pay dividends. —J.C.

X-FACTOR

RIYAD MAHREZ
Forward

The 35-year-old remains the nucleus of his national team as he heads to his second World Cup. After racking up five Premier League titles (with Leicester City and Man City), he helped Al-Ahli win its first AFC Champions League Elite crown in 2025.

BREAKOUT STAR

IBRAHIM MAZA
Midfielder

Mazadona is poised to assume the creative mantle from Mahrez. The Bayer Leverkusen talent, who has long been linked with Man City, is primarily an attacking midfielder, but the 20-year-old can comfortably play further upfield.

GROUP J SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/16	MATCH 2 • 6/22	MATCH 3 • 6/27
Kansas City, Mo.	Santa Clara, Calif.	Kansas City, Mo.
VS	VS	VS
Argentina	Jordan	Austria

LIKELY FINISH

Round of 32

1982 opener with Algeria. Instead, the debutants shocked the European champions, Lakhdar Belloumi's strike sealing a 2–1 win.

VISIONHAUS/GETTY IMAGES (2)

Illustration by **Martin Laksman**

GROUP

ICONIC MOMENT Diego Maradona's performance against England in the 1986 World Cup quarterfinals saw him first

FIFA RANKING 3

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 19th · **Last Appearance** 2022 (Champion)

Best Finish Champion (1978, 1986, 2022)

MANAGER

Lionel Scaloni

ARGENTINA

CAN THE REIGNING CHAMPS GET A RARE REPEAT?

WHEN LIONEL MESSI lifted the World Cup trophy in Qatar, it seemed as if a prophecy had finally been fulfilled. Fast-forward four years and Argentina seeks to repeat, even if history suggests it is nearly impossible to do: Only Italy (1934 and '38) and Brazil (1958 and '62) have accomplished the feat. But Argentina—which blew away the competition during CONMBEBOL qualifying—has a star-studded midfield that dictates the flow of play from the start. And then there's Messi up top to finish things off for what could be a euphoric end to his World Cup career. —A.L.

FROM L-LEFT: CARMEN MANDATO/GETTY IMAGES; FEDERICO PERETTI/NURPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES

X-FACTOR

LIONEL MESSI
Forward

The heartbeat of Argentina comes into his sixth World Cup with the same raw talent he possessed in 2006. Even at 38, he still averages about a goal per game for Inter Miami in MLS and he scored his 900th goal at the senior level earlier this year.

BREAKOUT STAR

NICO PAZ
Midfielder

One of Como's top goalscorers, the midfielder is not especially quick, but his ball control, technique and balance make him an asset. The 21-year-old scored his first international goal in La Albiceleste's 2–1 win over Mauritania at the end of March.

GROUP J SCHEDULE

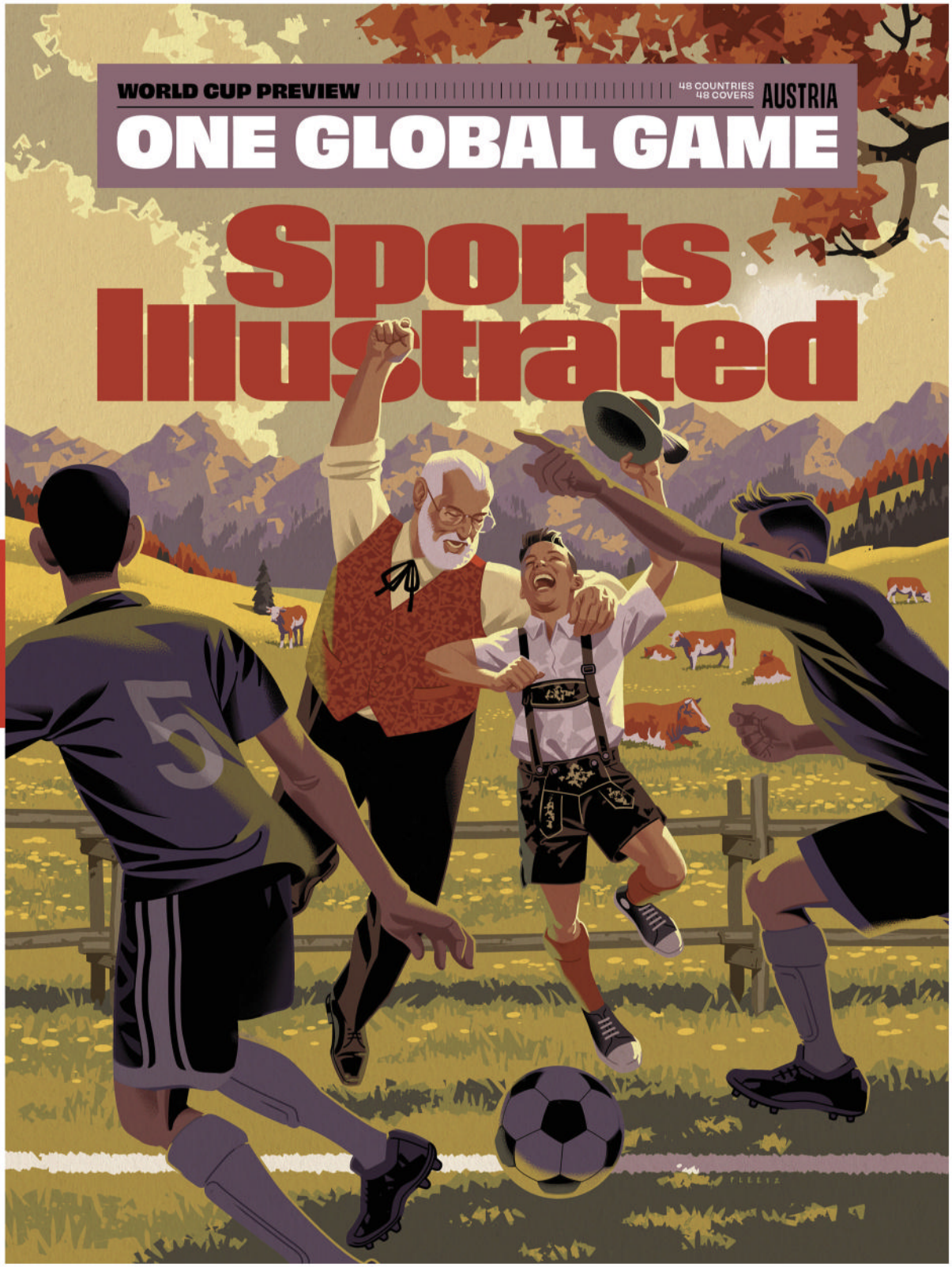
MATCH 1 · 6/16	MATCH 2 · 6/22	MATCH 3 · 6/27
Kansas City, Mo.	Arlington, Texas	Arlington, Texas
VS Algeria	VS Austria	VS Jordan

LIKELY FINISH

Runner-up

invoke the "Hand of God" to bag Argentina's opener; he then turned divine entity himself by scoring the goal of the century.

Illustration by **Michael Pleesz**



GROUP J

ICONIC MOMENT West Germany was the reigning champ in 1978, but Austria, which hadn't beaten a team from Germany

FIFA RANKING 24

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 8th • **Last Appearance** 1998 (Group Stage)

Best Finish Third Place (1954)

MANAGER

Ralf Rangnick

AUSTRIA

A PRESSING POWER MAKES ITS COMEBACK

IF RALF RANGNICK didn't save Austrian soccer, then he certainly helped it escape from the abyss. Appointed national team coach in 2022, Rangnick had previously instilled his philosophy at RB Leipzig and RB Salzburg as sporting director. Several Austrian players had passed through that pipeline, giving them a head start in adapting to his methods. His relentless press is led by 36-year-old striker Marko Arnautović, who was the leading goalscorer in qualifying. A run at Euro 2024 that saw the Austrians top their group showed glimpses of what is possible. —J.C.

X-FACTOR

CHRISTOPH BAUMGARTNER
Midfielder

As the team's only player to notch both a goal and an assist at Euro 2024, the 26-year-old is primed to be the fulcrum of Austria's attack. He is already in the midst of a career year for RB Leipzig, where he's leading the team in scoring.

BREAKOUT STAR

CARNEY CHUKWUEMEKA
Midfielder

Despite representing England at the youth level and being born to Nigerian parents, the young Borussia Dortmund midfielder switched to Austria, his country of birth, at the beginning of the year. The 22-year-old scored in his first call-up at the end of March.

GROUP J SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/16	MATCH 2 • 6/22	MATCH 3 • 6/27
Santa Clara, Calif.	Arlington, Texas	Kansas City, Mo.
VS	VS	VS
Jordan	Argentina	Algeria

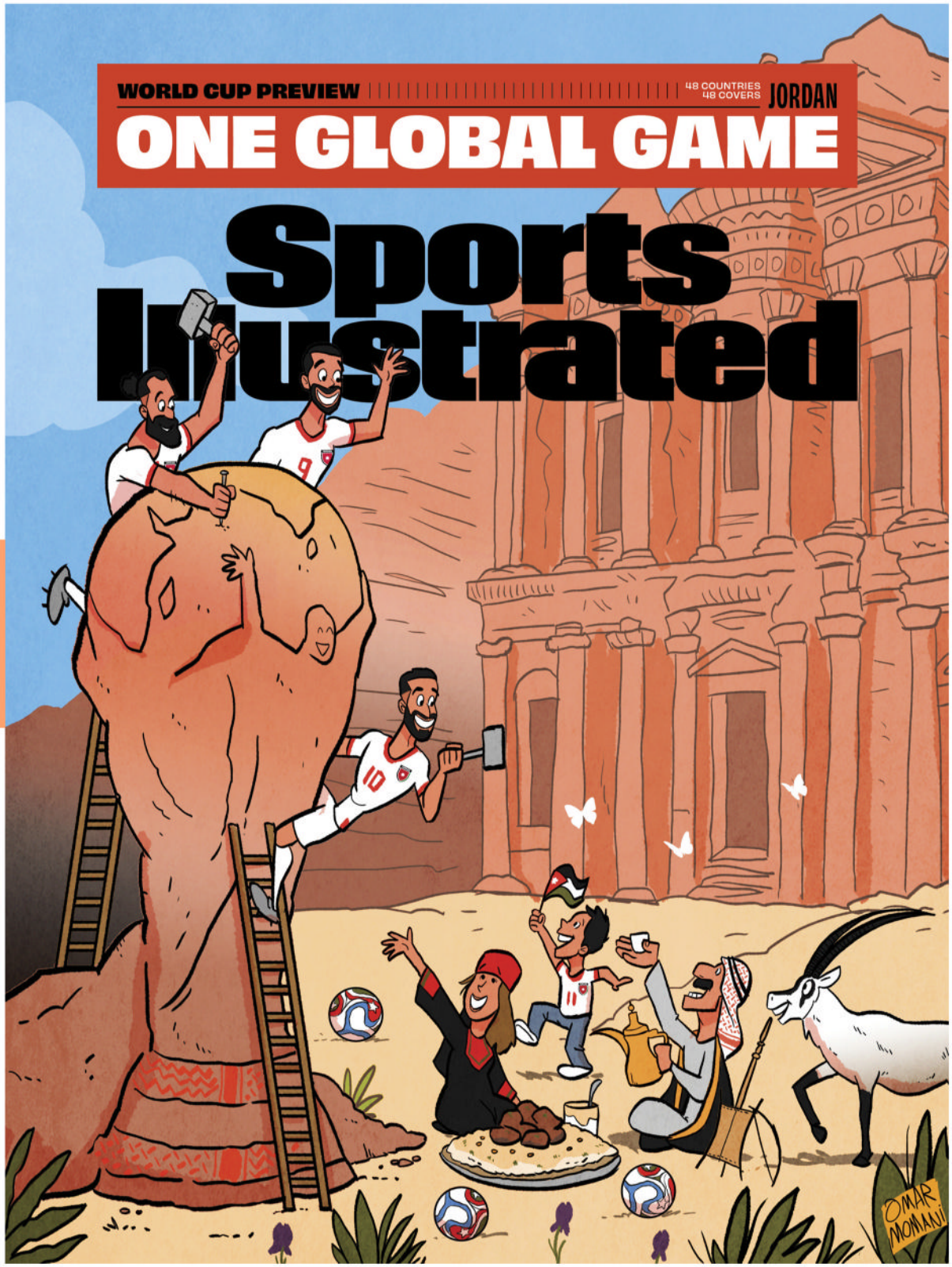
LIKELY FINISH

Round of 32

FROM LEFT: SEVERIN AICHBAUER/SEPA.MEDIA/GETTY IMAGES; CHRISTIAN BRUNA/GETTY IMAGES

in 47 years, came away with a 3–2 win. In Germany it's known as the Disgrace of Córdoba. But in Austria it's the Miracle of Córdoba.

Illustration by **Omar Momani**



GROUP

J

FUN FACT Jordan boasts one of the best nicknames at the tournament. Known as Al Nashama, or "the Chivalrous Ones,"

FIFA RANKING 63

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 1st (tournament debut)

Top International Result Runner-up, 2023 AFC Asian Cup

MANAGER

Jamal Sellami

JORDAN

THE CHIVALROUS ONES ARE THE ULTIMATE GUESTS

AFTER FOUR decades of frustration and heartbreak, Jordan's long-awaited debut at the World Cup has finally come on its 11th try. Manager Jamal Sellami, who played in the 1998 tournament with Morocco, masterminded an 8-5-3 qualification run, capped by a 3–0 win over Oman. Jordan defends in numbers, but it has the attacking ability to hit teams on the break. Little is expected of the Chivalrous Ones this summer, especially given their tough group draw, but that will not detract from the first-timers' joy at being there. —E.R.M

AMEEN AHMED/NURPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES (2)

X-FACTOR

MOUSA AL-TAMARI
Forward

Few Jordanians operate in Europe's elite leagues, making the adaptable Stade Rennais winger a trailblazer. Not only is he a regular for the French outfit, but he also contributed seven goals and two assists in Jordan's qualifying run as the team's captain.

BREAKOUT STAR

ALI OLWAN
Forward

Having clinched Jordan's place at the World Cup with a hat trick against Oman, the 25-year-old striker will carry his team's goalscoring burden. Currently playing club soccer in Qatar, he notched a tournament-high six goals at the 2025 Arab Cup.

GROUP J SCHEDULE

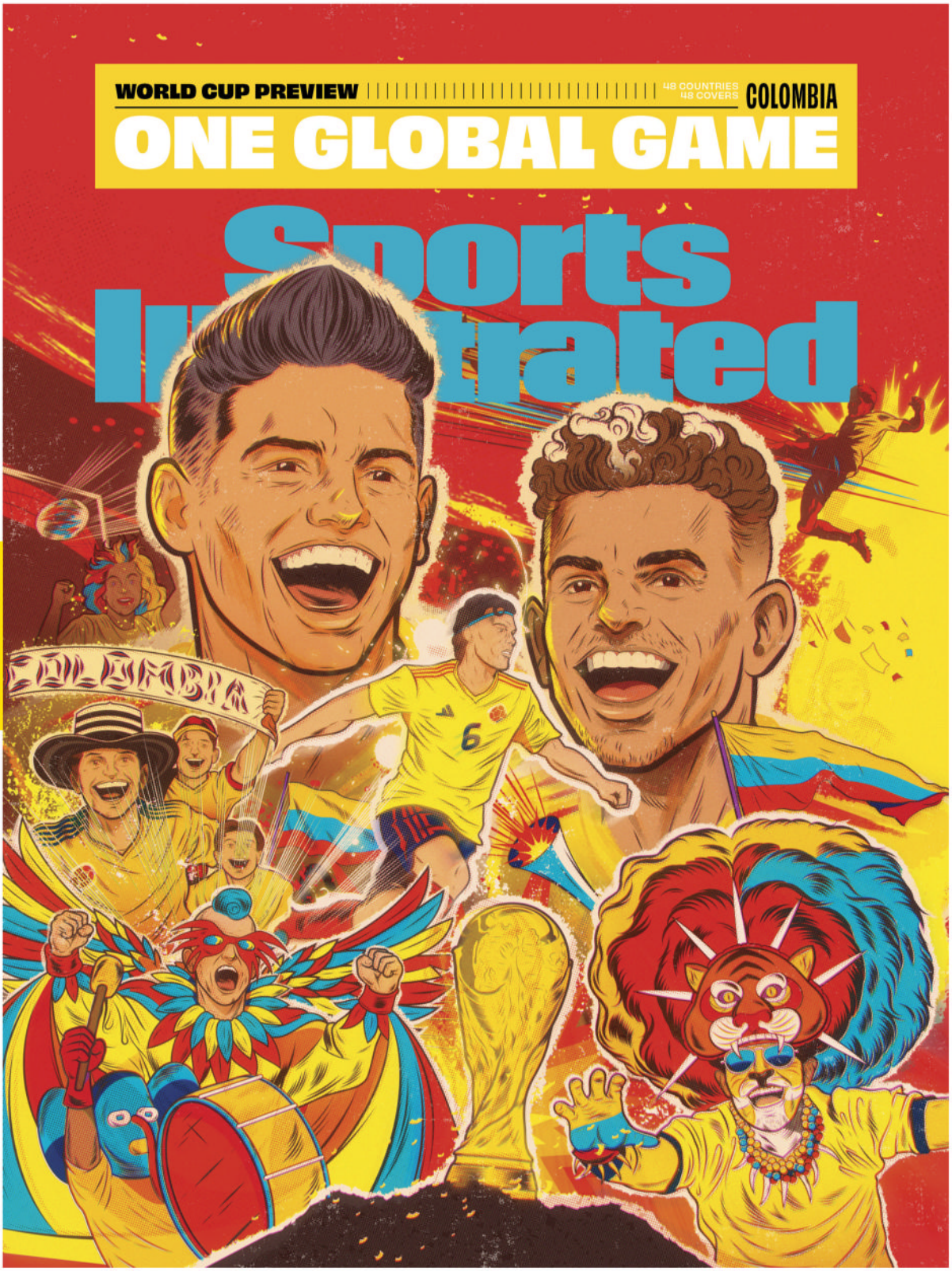
MATCH 1 • 6/16	MATCH 2 • 6/22	MATCH 3 • 6/27
Santa Clara, Calif.	Santa Clara, Calif.	Arlington, Texas
VS Austria	VS Algeria	VS Argentina

LIKELY FINISH

Group Stage

the moniker symbolizes bravery and commitment—traits the team hopes to embody against its more experienced adversaries.

Illustration by **Diego Patiño**



GROUP K

ICONIC MOMENT When James Rodríguez bent a stunning left-footed volley into the top corner at the 2014 World Cup

FIFA RANKING
13

TEAM HISTORY
World Cup Appearance 7th • **Last Appearance** 2018 (Round of 16)
Best Finish Quarterfinal (2014)

MANAGER
Néstor Lorenzo

COLOMBIA

LOS CAFETEROS ARE BUZZING FOR REDEMPTION

LOS CAFETEROS reached their lowest moment of the last decade when they missed out on the 2022 World Cup. They have bounced back under Néstor Lorenzo, reestablishing themselves as a top side capable of hanging with South American giants (and European ones as well—Lorenzo led the team to wins over Spain and Germany). Colombia made the 2024 Copa América final and beat Argentina and Brazil during World Cup qualifying. James Rodríguez is still the leader, but this is a largely new-look squad, one that thrives in transition and is lethal on set pieces. —A.L.

FROM LEFT: OMAR VEGA/GETTY IMAGES; OSCAR DEL POZO/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

X-FACTOR

LUIS DÍAZ
Forward

In the best form of his life, the 29-year-old will spearhead Colombia's attack. Lucho's "chaotic creativity," as coined by Bayern Munich boss Vincent Kompany, was on display during qualifying when he scored a team-leading seven goals.

BREAKOUT STAR

YASER ASPRILLA
Forward

After an impressive November camp, Asprilla finds himself in contention for a place in attack. Still raw, the 22-year-old, who is on loan at Galatasaray, is an agile playmaker capable of spicing up an aging front line. He'll make an impact from the bench.

GROUP K SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/17	MATCH 2 • 6/23	MATCH 3 • 6/27
Mexico City	Zapopan, Mexico	Miami Gardens, Fla.
VS	VS	VS
Uzbekistan	DR Congo	Portugal

LIKELY FINISH
Round of 32

against Uruguay in the round of 16, he earned himself Goal of the Tournament, a Puskás Award and a place at Real Madrid.

Illustration by **Edizon Musavuli**

GROUP K

FUN FACT The first time the country qualified for the World Cup, it was known as Zaire, after President Mobutu Sese Seko

FIFA RANKING 46

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 2nd • **Last Appearance** 1974 (Group Stage)

Best Finish Group Stage (1974)

MANAGER

Sébastien Desabre

DR CONGO

THE LEOPARDS ARE BACK AFTER A 52-YEAR EXILE

AFTER NAVIGATING a complicated path through the African playoffs, DR Congo stunned Jamaica in a must-win interconfederation matchup to return to the World Cup for the first time in more than half a century. Now past that hurdle, the team's ambitions shift toward making history with some program firsts. DR Congo has yet to score a goal, let alone win a game, at the World Cup. Given the Leopards' recent form, though, those could be tall tasks: They've failed to score more than one goal in eight of their last 11 matches. —A.L.

X-FACTOR

YOANE WISSA
Forward

After a knee injury last September that saw him miss the AFCON Cup, the Newcastle forward returned to action for his club in early December and played for his country in the playoffs. The 29-year-old stands out on a roster of unproven faces.

BREAKOUT STAR

NOAH SADIKI
Midfielder

The future of DR Congo's central midfield, the 21-year-old's play belies his age as he runs the engine room. Whether he's pressing, winning the ball back or dominating duels, the Sunderland standout does all the dirty work.

GROUP K SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/17	MATCH 2 • 6/23	MATCH 3 • 6/27
Houston	Zapopan, Mexico	Atlanta
VS Portugal	VS Colombia	VS Uzbekistan

LIKELY FINISH

Group Stage

FROM LEFT: SIMON BARBER/GETTY IMAGES; VISIONHAUS/GETTY IMAGES

ditched the Democratic Republic of the Congo name in 1971. It reverted back to being DR Congo after Seko was ousted in 1997.

Illustration by **Gonçalo Viana**

GROUP K

ICONIC MOMENT Trailing by three to North Korea in the 1966 quarterfinals, Portugal completed a remarkable comeback,

FIFA RANKING 5

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 9th • **Last Appearance** 2022 (Quarterfinals)

Best Finish Third Place (1966)

MANAGER

Roberto Martínez

PORTUGAL

RONALDO'S FINAL CHANCE AT WINNING IT ALL

FOR MANY years, Portugal was perceived as Cristiano Ronaldo & Co. If the superstar forward failed to deliver, high-pressure moments often got the better of the team. But now, Roberto Martínez's roster is rife with other big names, such as Paris Saint-Germain stars Vitinha and João Neves, and Manchester United captain Bruno Fernandes. As the reigning UEFA Nations League champions, the Seleção das Quinas have proven they can topple Europe's best. Portugal has never had a better chance to claim its first World Cup title and send its A-lister out on a high note. —A.L.

X-FACTOR

CRISTIANO RONALDO
Forward

He might now be 41 and a part-time influencer who spends most of his time living in Saudi Arabia, but CR7 is still one of the top goalscorers in the game. He has motivation: He's chasing 1,000 career goals and has never won a World Cup.

BREAKOUT STAR

JOÃO NEVES
Midfielder

Just a fresh-faced teenager watching the last World Cup on TV, the young Paris Saint-Germain star is an essential cog in Portugal's midfield. The 21-year-old scored his first international goals in November with a hat trick against Armenia.

GROUP K SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/17	MATCH 2 • 6/23	MATCH 3 • 6/27
Houston	Houston	Miami Gardens, Fla.
VS	VS	VS
DR Congo	Uzbekistan	Colombia

LIKELY FINISH

Quarterfinals

FROM LEFT: ALEXANDER HASSENSTEIN/GETTY IMAGES; MIGUEL LEMOS/EURASIA SPORT IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

scoring five unanswered goals, four from the fast and fierce Eusébio, whose Black Panther nickname never was more fitting.

Illustration by **Olga Aleksandrova**

GROUP K

FUN FACT In 2005, Uzbekistan infamously had a qualifying win over Bahrain annulled due to a officiating error, ultimately

FIFA RANKING 50

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 1st (tournament debut)

Top International Result Fourth place, 2011 AFC Asian Cup

MANAGER

Fabio Cannavaro

UZBEKISTAN

THE WHITE WOLVES ARE MORE PREY THAN PREDATORS

THESE WORLD CUP debutants made it clear they don't intend to be pushovers this year when they appointed Fabio Cannavaro, Italy's 2006 World Cup–winning captain, as their manager last October. Fans felt for predecessor Timur Kapadze, who guided the White Wolves to qualification only to be cast aside, but Cannavaro's extensive big-stage background and résumé of managing clubs across Asia could give this inexperienced squad the tactical savvy it desperately needs, especially in a group featuring heavyweights Portugal and Colombia. —B.L.

ANVAR ILYASOV/GETTY IMAGES (2)

X-FACTOR

ELDOR SHOMURODOV
Forward

Uzbekistan's captain and all-time leading scorer is the team's driving force, as the 30-year-old showed with his five goals and five assists in qualifying. The White Wolves rely on physicality and use the 6'3" forward as a focal point to hold up play.

BREAKOUT STAR

ABDUKODIR KHUSANOV
Defender

The Manchester City defender, who has a penchant for starting off attacks with pinpoint passes, is the central figure in the White Wolves' back line. The 22-year-old is also the first Uzbek player to compete in Ligue 1 and the Premier League.

GROUP K SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 · 6/17	MATCH 2 · 6/23	MATCH 3 · 6/27
Mexico City	Houston	Atlanta
VS	VS	VS
Colombia	Portugal	DR Congo

LIKELY FINISH

Group Stage

costing the White Wolves a World Cup debut. They qualified for the 2026 tournament the same day Bahrain was eliminated.

Illustration by **Vedran Klemens**

GROUP

ICONIC MOMENT Few can match the legacy of Mario Mandžukić, the striker who in 2018 secured Croatia its first

FIFA RANKING 11

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 7th • **Last Appearance** 2022 (Third Place)

Best Finish Runners-up (2018)

MANAGER

Zlatko Dalić

CROATIA

CAN LIGHTNING STRIKE THRICE FOR THE BLAZERS?

PERENNIAL OVERACHIEVER Croatia has entertained global audiences for more than a decade. Consistency and longevity have been key to the Blazers keeping up with more traditional behemoths. Zlatko Dalić has been the manager since 2017, overseeing a transformative era and putting his faith in the likes of Luka Modrić and Mateo Kovačić. Regularly written off as too old to win, Croatia can be expected to defy the odds once again. After all, the country came away with silver and bronze at the last two tournaments. —E.R.M

FROM LEFT: ANDREW MILLIGAN/PA IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; MARKO LUKUNIC/PIXSELL/MB MEDIA/GETTY IMAGES

X-FACTOR

LUKA MODRIĆ
Midfielder

Inexplicably still pulling the strings in Croatia's midfield at 40 years old, he remains the most capped player and is the team's leading man. The AC Milan maestro, who won the 2018 Ballon d'Or, will don the captain's armband in his fifth Cup appearance.

BREAKOUT STAR

LUKA VUŠKOVIĆ
Defender

The Bundesliga has grown accustomed to this 19-year-old's dominance after an incredible debut campaign at Hamburg while on loan from Tottenham Hotspur. He scored his first goal for the senior team back in March in a friendly against Colombia.

GROUP L SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/17	MATCH 2 • 6/23	MATCH 3 • 6/27
Arlington, Texas	Toronto	Philadelphia
VS	*VS*	*VS*
England	***Panama***	***Ghana***

LIKELY FINISH

Round of 16

appearance in a World Cup final with a deadly extra-time finish against England—a moment he later called "a miracle."

Illustration by **The Sporting Press**

GROUP

ICONIC MOMENT Sixty years after Geoff Hurst's go-ahead goal in the 1966 final, there's still debate over whether the

FIFA RANKING

4

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 17th • **Last Appearance** 2022 (Quarterfinals)

Best Finish Champion (1966)

MANAGER

Thomas Tuchel

ENGLAND

THE THREE LIONS STILL BELIEVE IT'S COMING HOME

FANS OF England's men's team are all too prone to lofty expectations, but this year's dreams may actually have foundation in something outside pure fantasy. The Three Lions, who reached consecutive Euro finals under Sir Gareth Southgate, are now piloted by Thomas Tuchel. The German is part of a growing trend of domestically successful managers taking the reins of national teams. Tuchel's side saw a perfect qualifying campaign: eight games, eight wins, 22 goals scored and not a single one conceded as the Three Lions breezed through their group. *—Grey Whitebloom*

X-FACTOR

HARRY KANE
Forward

England's captain and all-time leading scorer is the team's bellwether. When on form he can find the right balance between dropping into midfield to create and sniffing out tap-in finishes, making the Three Lions a force to be reckoned with.

BREAKOUT STAR

ELLIOT ANDERSON
Midfielder

Despite not being a senior international at the start of the season, the 23-year-old will end it as England's starting central midfielder. Anderson has been one of the Premier League's top passers during his second season with Nottingham Forest.

GROUP L SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/17	MATCH 2 • 6/23	MATCH 3 • 6/27
Arlington, Texas	Foxborough, Mass.	East Rutherford, N.J.
VS **Croatia**	*VS* **Ghana**	*VS* **Panama**

LIKELY FINISH

Quarterfinals

ball actually crossed the line. West German goalkeeper Hans Tilkowski went to his grave in 2020 believing it never went past him.

LEFT PAGE: SHAUN BOTTERILL/ALLSPORT/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES; OLIVER HARDT/UEFA/GETTY IMAGES; MATTHIAS HANGST/GETTY IMAGES; DAVID CANNON/ALLSPORT/GETTY IMAGES; SHAUN BOTTERILL/ALLSPORT/GETTY IMAGES; REG LANCASTER/DAILY EXPRESS/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES; JULIAN FINNEY/GETTY IMAGES; HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES; BEN RADFORD/ALLSPORT/GETTY IMAGES; DON MORLEY/ALLSPORT/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES; MIKE KING/ALLSPORT/GETTY IMAGES/HULTON ARCHIVE; RICHARD HEATHCOTE/GETTY IMAGES; RICHARD PELHAM/GETTY IMAGES; CLIVE ROSE/GETTY IMAGES; EDDIE KEOGH/THE FA/GETTY IMAGES; PETER KING/FOX PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES. RIGHT PAGE, FROM LEFT: MICHAEL REGAN/THE FA/GETTY IMAGES; NIGEL FRENCH/SPORTSPHOTO/ALLSTAR/GETTY IMAGES

Illustration by **Hanson Akatti**

GROUP

ICONIC MOMENT Ghana made its first trip to the World Cup a memorable one. Asamoah Gyan scored 68 seconds into a

FIFA RANKING 74

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 5th · **Last Appearance** 2022 (Group Stage)

Best Finish Quarterfinals (2010)

MANAGER

Carlos Queiroz

GHANA

A DARK CLOUD HANGS OVER THE BLACK STARS

GHANA HAS slid drastically down the soccer hierarchy on both the continental and world stages over the past decade, with an absence from the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations marking the nadir. The Black Stars began their road to redemption by qualifying for this World Cup, but expectations are understandably low following recent struggles. Manager Otto Addo returned after leading an unsuccessful 2022 campaign in Qatar, but was fired on March 31 and replaced by Carlos Queiroz. His side will immediately be tested by a titanic group. —E.R.M.

FROM LEFT: KOJI WATANABE/GETTY IMAGES; CHRISTIAN BRUNA/GETTY IMAGES

X-FACTOR

ANTOINE SEMENYO
Midfielder

Manchester City's willingness to spend $87 million to buy Semenyo from Bournemouth in January clearly underscored his ascent to an elite level. Ghana's hopes of progressing to the knockout stage will be shouldered by the 26-year-old.

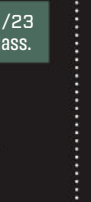
BREAKOUT STAR

ABDUL FATAWU
Forward

Although an ACL tear cut his debut Premier League season short in 2024–25 with Leicester City, he is set to shine this summer. The 22-year-old has a wicked left-footed shot and the ability to thread perfect passes to his teammates.

GROUP L SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 · 6/17	MATCH 2 · 6/23	MATCH 3 · 6/27
Toronto	Foxborough, Mass.	Philadelphia
VS	*VS*	*VS*
Panama	***England***	***Croatia***



LIKELY FINISH

Group Stage

group stage match against the Czech Republic and the Black Stars ultimately stunned the No. 2 ranked team at the time, 2–0.

Illustration by **Mickey Torres**

GROUP

ICONIC MOMENT When Felipe Baloy struck Panama's first World Cup goal against England in 2018, the nation's fans

FIFA RANKING
33

TEAM HISTORY

World Cup Appearance 2nd • **Last Appearance** 2018 (Group Stage)

Best Finish Group Stage (2018)

MANAGER

Thomas Christiansen

PANAMA

THE RED TIDE ARE CHASING AFTER SOME BIG FISH

DESPITE MISSING the field in 2022, Panama is still riding the momentum from its inaugural World Cup appearance in 2018. Thomas Christiansen has established a well-organized side capable of not only challenging but also beating Concacaf's historical powerhouses. After disrupting the region's status quo with a Gold Cup final appearance in 2023 and advancing from their Copa América group in 2024 (at the expense of the United States), Los Canaleros will arrive with more ambitious aims than a simple participation trophy. —R.C.

X-FACTOR

ADALBERTO CARRASQUILLA
Midfielder

Be it dispossessing opponents or undoing defenses with precise line-breaking passes, El Coco has become the defining player of the Christiansen era. The 27-year-old's prodigious right foot is matched only by his trademark hairstyle.

BREAKOUT STAR

KADIR BARRÍA
Forward

In January he scored five minutes into his international debut, then a month later he became the youngest Panamanian to particpate in Copa Libertadores, with Botafogo. The 18-year-old's fairy-tale start to 2026 has made him a fan favorite.

GROUP L SCHEDULE

MATCH 1 • 6/17	MATCH 2 • 6/23	MATCH 3 • 6/27
Toronto	Toronto	East Rutherford, N.J.
VS	*VS*	*VS*
Ghana	***Croatia***	***England***

LIKELY FINISH

Group Stage

FROM L-EFT: SHAUN CLARK/ISI PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES; AIZAR RALDES/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

were a sea of joyful tears, despite the fact that it was the last goal in a 6–1 loss. The Red Tide will get a rematch in group play.

SPHERE FACTOR

SOCCER IS simple: A ball, two nets, some feet. Nets and feet have stayed largely the same, but the game's most elemental object has evolved greatly. This year's World Cup game ball, the Adidas Trionda, has a new four-panel construction that evenly distributes drag and an embedded motion sensor chip to tell us exactly where it is. It would be unrecognizable to those who chased the lumpy orb in the first tournament *(below)*, even if the goal—put it in the net—is the same.

2022

2018

2014

2010

2006

2002

1998

1994

1990

1986

1982

1978

1974

1970

1966

1962

1958

1954

1950

1938

1934

1930

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